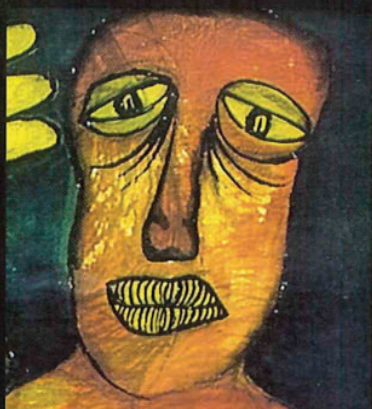


Dancing with Life

tales from the township



CHRISTOPHER MLALAZI

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Christopher Mlalazi is a writer in the genres of prose, poetry, theatre and television drama. He has had short stories published in anthologies in Zimbabwe, South Africa and the United Kingdom, as well as on the web.

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Christopher Mlalazi

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Broken Wings

A butterfly overtook Nozitha from behind, swooshing past her right ear, its path erratic on wobbly red and yellow wings, as if it was the first time for it to unravel them. She transferred the handbag to her right shoulder and quickened her pace, her eyes fixed on the butterfly, chanting in a voice so low and so sad that the sky sighed a gust of wind across her gaunt face:

Lend me your wings O Butterfly

Mother and Grandmother are waiting for me

And home is near if only I could sky

High with them over the trees

Focusing on the butterfly made her forget the sinewy red dust path, the sight of which, as it receded into the distance through the stunted thorn bushes, sometimes drained her body of energy, as it reminded her of the still longer journey ahead. The butterfly veered off the path, which leapt into her focus again. A donkey brayed in the distance, then dogs barked sharply, and a female voice, faint and hollow, called out something to her right that she could not make out.

She had been walking for the past hour, headed west, the blistering sun on her back, and sweat covered her face. In another hour and a half she would be home. She wondered how grandfather was managing there.

To her left, and downwind, a thick cloud of smoke spiralled an indecipherable journey towards the empty sky, but she had no eyes for it, only her dust covered bare feet as they flashed in front of her face as they ate the path.

Old Siziba sits statue-still on the edge of the bed, his hands clasped on his lap. A sunbeam streams in through a thin patch of the thatch roofing, bathing his feet in gold. The cuffs of his khaki trousers are frayed, and his feet, dirty, the skin cracking, are swollen.

On the bed lies his wife, MaDewa, covered in a grey blanket. His eyes are fixed on her face, which is an ashy green-black.

The fetid smell of human waste pervades the circular room. It comes from the floor, where his daughter Sihle lies, also covered in a threadbare blanket, this one brown in colour. The blanket is almost flat, as if there is no one underneath. His granddaughter, poor little Nozitha, will see to her when she comes back from the clinic, because, well, he is also not in such good health. It had been better when his wife was still strong, then she could attend to Sihle all day long. But six months ago she had also been struck down, and could not now even raise her little finger to help herself – let alone open her mouth to eat – Jesus!

At eighty two, Siziba's back is stooped, his face heavily lined, and his lower jaw hangs down in a perpetual look of half shock, revealing black toothless gums. Although it is hot in the room, he is dressed in an old red polo-necked jersey, its neck sagging around his spindly neck, with the wool of the right shoulder unravelling.

"Mh!" grunts the old man, and he claps his hands softly once, just as Sihle coughs weakly, once, twice, as if it's somebody else coughing far away deep inside her, somebody with a big blood-laced bubbly pain in the lungs.

"Mh!" Siziba grunts again, hawks and swallows phlegm.

The track had been Nozitha's constant companion for the six months that she had been going to the clinic alone. And today the new nurse, just like that horrible man Sibiya of the food ration, had strongly warned her that next time she came without an adult, she would not attend to her, because the law did not allow thirteen year old kids to collect drugs. And with Sibiya it was the card. That card! Nozitha had told her that her grandfather was not feeling well enough to come this far, his back and legs had worsened, and they did not have a scotch cart – or even donkeys to pull it – for him to use, but the nurse had snapped at her not to speak back – "I am not your mother," she had said. "And next time tell her to get up and come herself like other patients, otherwise there will be no drugs for her and your grandmother. I was not there when she was being careless."

Siziba shifts his feet on the dust floor, his face grimaced into bitter lines. His eyes are on his wife's face. How could this happen to her too? An old woman like this? *Isalukazi!* Impossible! The nurses at the clinic said that it must have been because she had been washing her ill daughter's open sores without gloves, but what did they know? Siziba knew better. Somebody in the village had bewitched his family, just so that they could get rich from it – the witches. Whoever it was, he didn't know, yet, but as soon as his back and legs got better, he was going to go far and find out. He wasn't called Francis Siziba for nothing. *Hayikhona!* And once he found out – *basopa!* I swear by Khohliwe, my departed mother's name – I will get you *mthakathi*.

He stands up, slowly, and, one foot after the other, and grunting at each step, hobbles to the crumbling mud wall of the hut, where a British military greatcoat hangs from a nail. It is mouldy brown in colour, and as ancient as the few remaining tendrils of white hair on his head. It had been inherited from his grandfather almost half a century back, who had fought in Egypt with the Allies during the great war of *amaJelimana*, and actually rode on a camel and sailed on the Indian Ocean in a gun-ship, something that had brought much pride to the Siziba clan.

From the left inner pocket of the jacket he removes a ruling party card. With it held in front of his eyes, in the manner of those with only a tiny grain of their sight remaining, he seems to satisfy himself it is what he is expecting to see, mumbles softly, and then returns it to the pocket. The old man limps back to the bed, one hand balanced on his hip, the other on the wall. He reaches it, and sits down in his former place, his hands on his lap. It is now mid-morning, and he wonders how far Nozitha is from the kraal, since she left so early that morning, when it was still dark outside, just as the first cocks crowed and the early birds twittered dreamily. She must be near home now.

Nozitha pulled sharply at her dress as a low thorn tree snagged the skirt from the side of the track. The dress was too big, it had belonged to her mother. The bulk of it was collected at her waist where she had tied it

with a shredded tie that she had been given by her grandfather. The handbag, which carried the drugs, belonged to her grandmother. It was made of a once cream synthetic material that was now peeling.

That afternoon she had to go to the school to collect the drought relief food – a packet of *kapenta*, a small bottle of cooking oil, a 5 kg packet of *mealie meal* and sugar beans. The school was an hour away from home, further south.

Siziba stands up, and leans over MaDewa's emaciated body on the bed. He grasps her by the shoulders, and heaves. Nozitha's former teacher, who sometimes visited, and always insisted that Nozitha should come back to school, said they had to keep turning her over, for to lie on one side for a long time created sores. Most of the time the old man did this with the assistance of Nozitha, both of them, also with frail bodies, pushing and pulling hard. Since she had not yet returned, he thinks that he had better try to do something. A man is not supposed to be weak like a baby.

His jaw tightens, and he pushes harder. But he cannot move the body. It is too heavy for him. MaDewa's eyes, the sockets hollow, are fixed on his. It seems as if she is looking at him from their younger years, when they had first met at Renkini Long Distance Bus Terminus in the city. She had been selling chunks of soil from termite mounds, which pregnant mothers liked to melt on their tongues, and also home-made scouring powder. He had been selling rat poison. Those had been the days. Not this – not this – this nonsense! And the spirits had given them one child, Sihle. When she was two years old, they had decided to relocate from the city to the rural areas where they hoped to 'make it'. The city seemed too complicated, and there was too much sin in it.

MaDewa's lower lip is red raw, and her body grass thin under the blanket. He pushes again – his feet suddenly skid on the floor, and he falls across the bed, his forehead knocking with a loud painful sounding thud on hers. He curses, straightens, and looks down at her, rubbing his forehead, tears in his eyes. Her eyes have rolled up, showing the whites, and there is no movement from her chest.

Nozitha thought about the card. Last month, she had gone to the school without it, because her grandfather could not find it. On the school football ground had been a long queue of the village's starving, a heartbreaking, motley crowd of the old and young.

The food was being handed out from a lorry by the village's party supremos, Sibiya, who checked the card, MaNdlovu, who kept the register, and Abisha, who gave out the rations.

Nozitha had stood in the queue, and, finally, when her turn came, Sibiya had looked at her, frowning.

"We don't want children here. How many times have I said this? Where is your grandfather?" He knew her family, and the illnesses at home, as he was a neighbour, but a neighbour who did not visit.

"He is not feeling well," Nozitha had replied in a weak voice, her fingers crossed behind her back.

"That troublesome old man," Sibiya had half cursed. "I know he is pretending." He had hesitated for a moment, and then had asked. "Where is it?" He had held his hand to her. "Some people are defecting, and they are going to pay for it." His lips had curled in a sneer. "The dogs. This country will never be a colony again. Not as long as I live."

Nozitha had shrugged her thin shoulders. "Grandfather can't find it, but he said I must tell you he is still a supporter, and will never change." Grandfather had particularly stressed that to her before she had left home. Abisha had been looking at her, his eyes filled with sympathy. "He said viva," she had added, punching the air with a little fist. And grandfather had also made her wear his old party t-shirt, which hung to her ankles, for effect. The t-shirt had the picture of the local MP on its front, a fat faced man, jowls hanging, as if he was capable of barking.

Sibiya had clicked his tongue in disgust. "Your grandfather thinks we are playing." He had roughly pushed her out of the queue, making her stumble. "Next!" he had called out, and taken the proffered card from an old woman behind Nozitha who was leaning heavily on a walking stick, her face blank with hunger-induced fatigue. A walking

corpse.

Eyes glistening with tears, Nozitha had stood by the side of the queue and watched the pile of rations getting smaller and smaller in the back of the lorry. When only one person was left, an old sickly man who moved forward on his knees, dragging a walking stick, Nozitha had turned around and, her step heavy, walked away, headed home.

Halfway there, Abisha had appeared out of the thorn bushes in front of her. Surprised – how had he got ahead of her, for she had left him at the lorry? – Nozitha had, in respect, stepped out of the path to let him pass. But Abisha had stood in her way. He had smiled at her, and taken a small bottle of cooking oil out of the right trouser pocket of his overalls, and a small packet of sugar beans from the other pocket.

He had a long, weak face, and wore a straw hat aslant, which was tied under his chin with elastic. He had held the cooking oil towards her.

“Take, sisi,” he had prompted, smiling. A globule of clear snot peeped from his left nostril.

Nozitha did not hesitate. She had taken the cooking oil. “Thank you, baba,” she had replied, curtsying politely.

“If you come next month when we return,” he had continued, “you will get more than the others, you are such a good girl. You deserve even more.”

Nozitha had just smiled.

“I am a good man to good people.” Abisha had said. “It’s only that people underrate me.” He had put his right hand on her bony shoulder in a fatherly way. “I especially like you because you are not weak, and you treat yourself like a woman, somebody thrice your age. Look at what you are doing at home. How is your mother now?” he had enquired, his hand gently massaging her shoulder.

“She is not well,” Nozitha had responded in a sad voice, and then sniffed. Abisha had also sniffed wetly.

He had drawn her closer, and his hands had gone around her shoulders, and he had patted her back. “Don’t cry, child.” His voice had become angry. “Where is God then? Tell me, you who believe, when

people as young as this girl have to suffer like this.” He had paused. Crickets trilled incessantly all around them, the blazing sun glared, and the sparse tufts of dry grass wilted from the heat. Then he had continued. “And your grandmother?”

“She is also not well.” Nozitha’s voice had grown smaller.

“Your grandfather?”

“Him too.” It was barely a whisper.

“Shame, my dear girl.” He was now holding her close, their bodies almost touching. Her head reached to his chest. “But don’t worry, we are there for you. I promise you this day I will assist you to the best of my ability, after all, you have nobody else.”

He had removed his hand from around her shoulders, took out a two hundred thousand dollar note from his back pocket and pressed it into her hand. She had taken it. He was such a kind man.

“Let me show you something else,” he had whispered to her. She had looked at his face. His eyes were half hooded, and the snot had returned to his nose. “But we mustn’t be seen.” His voice had a tremble now, faint.

He had taken her by the hand, and led her off the path, and behind some bushes. There, he had... he had... it had been so painful...but she had gritted her teeth, and held her breath, wishing away the pain by thinking of the runny waste of her mother’s stomach that she threw into the bushes behind the hut everyday. She imagined hurling it at Abisha’s face. Finally, it was over. He had wiped the blood from her with one of his holed socks, dug a hole in the ground and buried it there. All the time, he had not taken off his straw hat.

A grey pigeon, its tail fringed in white, flies past her against the sky, the beat of its wings a musical whirr, heading in the direction of her home.

Dove O Dove

Fly fast to Grandfather

Help him in the search O Dove

And find the card quickly

Because I know you can do it

*For today is the day of the food again
That is given by snakes that bite.
Please O my beautiful friend –*

And in the late afternoon, after returning from the school with the food – if the lorry comes – she has to go and collect water from the borehole, a thirty minute walk away. The well behind the homestead had long since dried up. She had collected enough firewood yesterday, and that would last them for two or three days, so she had no problem with that today.

Finally, she rounds a small hill and sees grandfather's kraal, a single derelict hut with fast eroding walls that threaten to keel over anytime should a strong wind blow. It was built beside a looming baobab tree that rises mightily into the blue sky, seeming to challenge it with its bare branches of fingers to stop playing the fool and bring the succour of rain to the village. There is no fence around the hut, just a few moth-eaten logs to show that there once had been.

In the hut Siziba clutches at his left breast, and folds to his knees, his mouth pursed, and his eyes screwed shut in pain. The smell of human waste has intensified. The old man is still for a moment, and then he wilts across the body on the floor, and is still again. The sunbeam has climbed on to the bed, and now bathes the stomach of the figure under the blanket. A fly darts across the beam.

There is a movement outside the door. It opens, and bright light streams into the hut. First, her shadow, then Nozitha, walks in, to the sound of buzzing flies. Her first thought is that she has to wash her mother. And today, at the clinic, she had been lucky to get plastic gloves along with the drugs, even though the new nurse had been so grouchy.

She gasps as she sees her grandfather lying sprawled over her mother. The handbag she carries thuds to the floor. As she bends to touch her grandfather, she becomes aware of her grandmother's staring eyes and open mouth. A thin anguished scream tears through the hut.

Election Day

He suddenly stood up and punched a fist into his left palm.

“Damn!” he cursed to the empty room. Then he called out, “Twenty!”

Twenty entered the room. He went down on his knees in front of him. “Your Excellency,” he said, his head bowed over a potbelly straining against a buttoned suit jacket.

His Excellency pointed at a sofa. “Sit.”

Twenty sat on the edge of the sofa, and His Excellency sank back into the throne, which completely dwarfed him. Nine decades and four months old, he was now a shrivelled old man with a stooped back and teary bloodshot eyes. He was dressed in an immaculate white safari suit and a leopard skin cowboy hat.

He frowned, looking at Twenty’s right foot. It was tapping on the richly carpeted floor. Then he smiled sweetly. “Relax, Twenty.”

The foot immediately ceased its activity, and Twenty wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, his eyes on his knees. “Things are bad outside, Your Excellency,” he said in almost a whisper.

His Excellency jerked forward on his seat, a finger pointed at Twenty’s forehead. “Eh! Eh! Don’t exaggerate.”

“I am not exaggerating.”

“Do you know your problem, my dear comrade?” His Excellency asked, still leaning forward, his eyes on the bald patch on the crown of Twenty’s head. The remaining fringe of Twenty’s hair was dyed pitch black. “You panic very easily, just like a puppy. Woof woof behind a fence and, if you pretend to pick up a stone, it flees away with its tail between its legs.”

Twenty looked up. “I am not panicking, Your Excellency,” he replied, his voice now whining, and again wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

“Then why are you sweating like that – are you defecating?”

Twenty wiped his forehead in a sneaky manner. “The election results are not so good so far, Your Excellency. The ballot counting is

almost finished, there is only one constituency left, and the opposition is leading us by a very wide margin. We have lost. Everything is crashing down on us!”

His Excellency threw back his head and cackled in laughter. “And you are now crapping in your pants.” He clapped his hands sharply, and cackled again. But there was no laughter in his blood-shot eyes. They glittered wetly. “Stop being paranoid.” He wagged his finger at Twenty. “To use your own words – it is you who is going to crash out of my elite team if you behave like an old woman who has just dreamt of her departed ancestors calling her name. Anyway,” he spread out his hands in front of his chest, palms up, his shoulders hunched, “why should you be frightened of the election results? You are not the leader of this country.” He paused for a moment, his eyebrows arched, his hands still spread out towards Twenty. Then he dropped them on the arms of the throne and continued. “Let me tell you something for nothing, my dear personal advisor. This is not a children’s game we are playing here. This is not *ara-wuru-wuru-skoko*. It is a game of true men. Men who are larger than life. Did you read comic books when you were young?”

Twenty perked up. “Yes I read them, Your Excellency – *Kid Colt, Spiderman, Superman, Tin Tin...*”

His Excellency waved his hand at him. “No, not that shit. There is one that you have left out. My favourite.” A tiny smile flitted across his lips.

Twenty’s eyes rolled to the ceiling in thought, and he looked sideways at His Excellency. “You mean *Wonder Woman*?”

“No,” His Excellency shook his head, firmly. “Not that prostitute.” He stood up, raised his spindly arms and flexed them, his face twisted in effort. “*The Incredible Hulk!*”

Twenty’s face broke into a wide smile. “I love him. He is my hero.”

His Excellency’s teeth flashed in a grim smile. “I am the new *Incredible Hulk* of this continent.” He roared like Hulk, grabbed a startled Twenty and threw him to the ground. Twenty immediately rose up, fear on his face. His Excellency roared again, and threw him down for the second time. This time Twenty did not try to rise up. His

Excellency strutted around the room, roaring, and flexing his thin arms. He went back to Twenty, who was still lying on the ground. Twenty cringed back in fear.

His Excellency offered him his hand, now laughing. “Get up comrade. You look so undignified on the floor.”

Twenty took the offered hand, but used his own power to propel himself up. His Excellency sank back into the throne, and Twenty sat on the edge of the sofa, his right foot tapping again.

“That is the lesson Twenty. Never worry – nobody can defeat the *Incredible Hulk*, not even with the assistance of the devil himself, or their fucking atomic bomb.”

“But, Your Excellency, the election results!” said Twenty. “It is over for us.”

An irritated frown creased His Excellency’s brow. “I told you not to bother yourself about that. Have you never heard of a soccer team leading six nil being beaten at the very last minute without any match fixing?”

“I beg your pardon, Your Excellency, but this is not soccer.”

“Your scrotum!”

Twenty did not even blink. “But if we lose, Your Excellency, what is to become of us?”

“Don’t have sleepless nights over it, otherwise your wife will give it to your hungry garden boy if you are so frightened that you can’t get it up for her.”

“If I may speak...”

“Shut up!”

“But Your Excellency, you have not walked the streets of the cities for a very long time now. You do not know what is happening out there. As your personal advisor, I know better. I live with them.”

“Twenty – what kind of a name is that anyway? Mmh? What was your father thinking of when he gave you such a funny English name? Come to think of it, I have never heard of an English man with such a name. By the way, what kind of a job was your father doing when you were born? Do you remember that far back to the colonial era?”

“Yes I remember,” said Twenty. “He was employed as a garden boy – a garden man – a gardener – in the suburbs by a Mr Williams, Your Excellency.”

“Then Twenty must have been a very memorable number for him to be so excited by it as to give it to his beloved son. His son who is now personal advisor to a respected, and feared, let me not forget to mention that, Head of State. What could have given him an erection about this number twenty? Would you know?”

“I don’t know, Your Excellency.”

“You never even asked him?”

“Yes I never.”

“How could you not ask him? Maybe he was insulting you!” His Excellency smiled. “Let me try to guess. He must have been given twenty very sweet lemons by this Mr Williams as his salary for that month when you were born. So I think your father left other names out. He should have called you Twenty Sweet Lemons. T.S.L. Now, let me give you some free advice, my personal advisor. Your assessment of the povo is very wrong, just like judging the sweetness of an orange by its skin, or that of a woman by the shape of her lips.”

“But this is different, Your Excellency.”

“My people will never desert me. Do you hear me, T.S.L.? I am their life leader if you didn’t know, chosen by the ancestral spirits themselves. That is why you always hear me refer to the povo as my people, the country as my country. Simple as that.”

Twenty spread his hands in appeal. “But I am the one who is supposed to advise you, Your Excellency. The election results...”

“Rubbish! You don’t know anything about the election results. Why are you such a coward?”

“How can I not be afraid when I know very well what is waiting for us outside? The people are going to tear us to pieces.”

“They will tear your grandmother to pieces!”

“Your Excellency, I beg you to listen to me. Poverty is rife in the streets, the people are hungry, and very angry.”

His Excellency suddenly stood up, went to Twenty, and grabbed his

shirt collar with both of his hands. Then he hissed into his face, "How can they not be disillusioned when you have US\$500 million in your private Swiss account, and I have one billion pounds? How can they not be angry when I have a sprawling coffee plantation in South America, limousines in every capital city in Europe, a castle in Belgium, a pleasure boat on the Indian Ocean, a private jet and a diamond mine in South Africa, amongst my many international assets, and inflation here is at the ceiling? That is what you want to hear isn't it?" He released Twenty's shirt collar, and wagged a finger at his face. "If you run away, my dear boy, you won't get far, because the people of this country, with the assistance of the world's robo-police of course, will hunt you down and, once they catch you, you will learn not to be a dull embezzler." He suddenly smiled, a charming smile, stooped and patted Twenty's shoulder, his face close to his. "Calm down, Twenty. Calm down. I am still around. I will take care of you my dear boy. Haven't I done so these past years we have been working together? I even made you what you are today!"

Twenty rearranged his shirt collar. "Yes you did, but..."

"Now get out of my sight!"

"Your Excellency!"

"I said get out!" His Excellency's hand dipped into his inside jacket pocket, and it came out holding a tiny silver pistol. Twenty jumped up from the sofa and scooted out of the room. The door closed softly.

His Excellency returned the pistol to his pocket, and blew his snot onto the carpet. Wiping his nose with his fingers, he went to the throne and plopped into it. He sat back, softly stroking his cleanly shaven chin in deep thought. Then he picked up the telephone on a side table, dialled, and spoke into it.

"Twenty?" He listened. "I want to go to the back garden for some fresh air. Get the army ready, and two gun-ships in the air. Bring a vest for me as well. Let's meet in the kitchen right now."

He stood up, took a walking stick that leaned against the throne and walked out of the room, balancing heavily on it.

Six members of the Presidential Guard, all armed with submachine guns, lined the corridor, three on either side. They snapped to attention when His Excellency appeared from the inner sanctum.

He walked between them, headed towards the door of the kitchen, which was the second on the right. The third door on the left opened, and the First Lady also walked into the corridor, carrying two brown leather suitcases. At fifty years of age, she was slim bodied, and still retained signs of her youthful beauty. His Excellency had snapped her up when, at the age of nineteen, she had won a university beauty pageant.

“Modi,” His Excellency said, coming to a stop. “Why all these bags, my dear? Are you visiting someone? I don’t remember you telling me about it?”

“Let’s go and talk in there,” Modi replied in a grim voice, nodding towards the half open door of the inner sanctum.

They stood inside the closed door, Modi’s suitcases on either side of her.

“The jet is waiting at the airport,” she whispered in a hoarse voice. “I have packed everything we shall need. Let us go now before they come and get us!”

“Who get us? I don’t understand, dear,” His Excellency said in a calm voice.

“Have you heard the results?” Modi’s eyes were opened wide in fright.

His Excellency laid his left hand, with the right one on top if it, on the head of his walking stick and regarded Modi with a slightly furrowed brow. “The results of what, dear?”

“The election results!”

His Excellency waved a hand airily at her. “O that. What of them?”

“They are winning!”

“Who is winning?”

“The opposition!”

“What are they winning?”

“The elections of course! Let us leave right now while there is still time. O God I am so frightened!”

His Excellency laid a hand on her arm. “Relax my dear.” He pointed at a sofa. “Sit down.”

“I am not sitting down! Let us go!”

His Excellency blinked his eyes at her. “Go where darling?”

“Please stop asking silly questions. You know very well what I mean. We are going to the coffee plantation in South America, or the castle in Belgium. There we shall be safe.”

“Modi, I told you to relax. Relax. Sit down. Should I order a glass of water for you?”

“I don’t want it!”

His Excellency shrugged his shoulders. “So be it.” He sat down on the arm of the sofa.

Modi stood before him. “If you don’t want to come, I am taking the children and going without you.”

His Excellency looked up at her. “You panic easily, my dear. Everything is under control. I have just been telling that fool Twenty the very same thing. The final election results have not yet been announced, and everybody around me is already peeing in their trousers. What kind of people am I surrounded by? Surely they don’t all wear nappies?”

“But the opposition is leading by a very wide margin. We have lost.”

“Modi, when I married you, I told you that I wanted a wife with nerves of steel, not a woman with the heart of a pigeon that beats a thousand times in a minute.” He stood up, went to the phone, picked it up and dialled. “Twenty? Can you please come in?” He placed the phone down. Then he walked to the throne and sat down. He threw his right leg over the left one, formed a steeple with his hands on his lap, and fixed his eyes meditatively on the door. Modi’s eyes were on him, her face sulking.

The door opened softly. Twenty walked in.

“Help my wife carry her bags back to her chambers,” His

Excellency crisply ordered him. “Thank you.”

Twenty looked at him. “Your Excellency...”

“Don’t make noise, you cunt. Leave, both of you!”

Twenty and Modi stood before the door of her chambers. Twenty held her suitcases in either hand.

“Can’t you convince him that there is no longer any hope?” Modi asked.

Twenty placed the suitcases on the floor and looked up at her. She was taller than him. The bald patch on his head glistened with sweat. “I tried hard this morning, ma’am, but he does not want to listen to me.”

“But you are his personal advisor!”

“Yes I am, but today he is turning a deaf ear to my advice. He is giving me advice instead.”

“Do you think this might have affected his mind?” she whispered. “I have never known him like this, and you know he is no longer a young man.”

“I have also never known him like this,” Twenty said. “He has always been a shrewd and calculating man who does not take any unnecessary risks, especially where his life is concerned, but now – I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

“Maybe he has become disorientated and he thinks it’s his party that is leading the polls.”

“Maybe. He is behaving so strangely today. Can you imagine if we lose? I don’t even want to think about it. I can already see the povo pouring into state house – no!” He shook his head, as if to shake off a nightmare.

“All because my husband does not want to face reality. What can I do to convince him we have to run while there is still time and the airports are still open to us?”

“You know your husband’s temper too well when he is crossed, ma’am,” Twenty said. “A few minutes back he nearly shot me.”

Tears sprang into Modi’s eyes. She opened the bedroom door, took the suitcases and went inside. The door closed as Twenty walked away

along the corridor.

His Excellency, sitting on the throne, picked up the phone from the side table and dialled.

“Twenty? Is the vote counting finished? Good. I don’t want to hear the final results. Tell Amon to announce them to the people. In the meantime, I will be in the bathroom preparing myself for the people, since, to use your words, they now want my blood.” He banged the phone down. There was a determined look on his old face. He stood up from the throne, took his walking stick, and walked towards the door, his body erect.

Modi sat on her bed, her eyes fixed on a big screen television on a table before her. On it Amon, the National Vote Director, stood behind a podium in the vote counting centre. A battery of TV cameras and microphones were arrayed before him. In his hand he held a single sheet of paper. He cleared his throat, and spoke.

“Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. Now for the moment we have all been waiting for. The final results of the election.” Modi sighed deeply. Her heart was pounding in her chest. “Ladies and gentlemen, the impossible has happened tonight. I am sure the opposition has been celebrating already and their leader preparing to go to State House.”

Modi placed her right hand over her heart. It was now thudding. She bit her lower lip, and the TV screen swum as tears filled her eyes.

“However, there has been a massive turn-out in the last remaining constituency, where there was overwhelming support for the ruling party, resulting in His Excellency remaining our leader.”

Modi toppled back on the bed in a faint.

The TV droned on. “International observers have declared the election free and fair. The number of votes cast for each candidate are as follows...”

The Border Jumpers

Zenzo thought he heard a murmur of voices behind him. He darted a look over his shoulder, changing the bundle of clothing to his left hand.

A prickle ran down his spine. The guy with the permed hair was no longer following in the moonlight behind him. He looked in front, his laboured step faltering for a moment, the mosquitoes attacking his ears forgotten. Vusa's bald head was there, moving forward, light silver ripples following in its wake. He threw another look behind him – just as a scream tore across the river, and a solid object thudded into his right leg under the water. He lashed out with the leg, something grabbed him around both thighs, and he found himself under water. A split second later, he didn't know how, he was upright again and, in blind panic, splashing away in the general direction he thought they had been headed – he could not see Vusa anymore!

More screams and yelling filled up the night from all round him. One thought gripped his heart in a cold vice. Crocodiles. He overtook two other men also frantically splashing forward, and then, magically, he was out of the water and standing on a slab of rock a safe distance away from the bank. He was gasping for breath, his heart hammering, and his bundle of clothes, dripping wet, still clutched in his hand. The other border jumpers were scattered around him. Vusa stood by his side, his body doubled.

Vusa straightened. His muscled chest was heaving. He looked up at Zenzo, who was a head taller than him, and opened his mouth to speak.

“Stupid!” The low voiced expletive came from behind Zenzo. It was old Mbedzi. “I can leave you here right now if I want to! Do you want to sell us out to the border patrol?” Mbedzi was dressed in only a pair of black boxer shorts, and had a thin wiry body. He was their guide.

“Don't insult me.” There was anger in Zenzo's voice.

Vusa quickly stepped between them. The moonlight glinted off the wetness on his face as he looked at Zenzo.

“Was it you?” he asked, his voice not giving anything away.

The rest of the border jumpers were now standing in a tight circle around them.

“No.” Zenzo replied.

“Don’t deny it.” It was Mbedzi looking around Vusa at him.

“Then who was it?” Vusa asked.

“I don’t know,” Zenzo said. “But after the first scream something grabbed my legs under the water, and that’s when I started running.”

“I passed a floating tree before the screams,” somebody said from the ring of shadowed faces. “I also nearly screamed when its branches brushed against my legs.”

“I thought it was a crocodile,” Zenzo said.

Mbedzi snorted loudly. “I saw it also,” he said. “And that’s what touched your legs.” He wagged a threatening finger at Zenzo’s face, then shook his head, but did not say anything.

“I passed the tree too,” Vusa said, wringing water from his clothes.

“Stop wasting time and dress up!” Mbedzi snapped. He held his overalls, which, surprisingly, were still dry, in front of his knees and stepped into them, one leg after the other. Then he started buttoning up, from the bottom to the top. He had stopped muttering and was staring thoughtfully at the buttons as his fingers, one after the other, swiftly popped them into the eyelets, when Zenzo spoke.

“And the guy with the permed hair who was following behind me in the river,” he was busy donning his wet and cold clothes, “where is he?”

Mbedzi’s fingers momentarily froze over a button. His sunken eyes flicked over the heads of all the men, then the fingers resumed their downwards movement to the button and he squeezed it into the eyelet. He did not say anything, but he was shaking his head slowly from side to side, his lips moving softly. None of the men noticed this.

“Yes you are right – he seems not to be here,” Vusa said, then turned to Zenzo after also taking a quick look around at the others. “Come closer *’magents*,” he called softly to the others. “Let’s count ourselves and see who is not here.”

The circle of border jumpers around them tightened. A hyena

laughed in the distance. The scent of mud wafted over them from the river above the croak of frogs, as if it had let out a sigh.

A head count was quickly made, officiated over by Vusa.

Two men were missing from the original thirteen who had waded into the river. The one with the permed hair and one other nobody seemed to be able to remember clearly, except for Zenzo.

"It's that big guy who seemed to be close friends with the one with the permed hair," Zenzo said. "He was bringing up the rear." Zenzo had been third from last.

"Maybe they got cold feet and turned back in the water," somebody suggested.

"Yeah, maybe," somebody else agreed. "They can't have drowned in that shallow water."

"Shallow water!" another voice, outraged. "Do you know shallow water when you see it, you fool?"

"They are now fodder in some crocodile's lair," Mbedzi cut in, silencing everyone. He took out a snuff tin from his overalls, opened it, pinched the dark powder inside and sniffed it up both nostrils. The border jumpers were all silent, some watching him, others looking at the expanse of moon-plated water, as if demanding an explanation from it with their eyes of what had happened to their two companions.

Mbedzi closed the snuff tin and put it back into his overalls' pocket. He blew his nostrils, one after the other, towards the river, and wiped his hand on the seat of his overalls, staring at the ground in concentration. Then he turned round again and faced the huddle of faces before him.

He pointed towards the water. "Whatever happened back there, just forget about it," he told them. "Your way lies only forward, and while we are standing here like the opposition discussing the Party, time is moving, and if we are late to the pick up point, the van won't wait for anyone. I don't have to mention to you the kind of shit you will be in should that happen."

He turned round to face the river. "Wherever you are my two brave sons", he addressed the river, his voice solemn. "Let it be known that it

was not through your friends here that you got left behind. I plead with you to grant them a safe journey to Johannesburg, where you were also headed. Also to grant them a safe haven from the poverty from which they are fleeing.” A bat swooped at them on silent wings and, as suddenly, melted into the night. He turned to the watching men again. “Stop gawking at me and let’s get moving!”

Mbedzi led them into the forest, following a path through the dark bushes that was only visible to his bare feet.

Eeish!

The slap landed again. Same cheek. I did not flinch. I did not want to give him even that satisfaction.

And I was not surprised how easily he fell down when I pushed him on the chest, fake reading glasses, moustache and all – *bhu!*

I did not see him pick himself up, for I was already walking away, my cheek a hot air balloon straining for the open sky.

“If you come home I will fix you, *nja!*” the bellow followed behind, above the laughter of the women vendors who ply their trade from the ditch, once my mother’s friends. News for the whole month for them – blast them too.

I headed home.

“Did your father find you?” MaNyoni asked me. She was at the corner, bent over the stove. The light bulb blew last night, and the flame of a candle was performing a solo dance on the floor beside her.

“What if he did?” I replied, sunk deep into the old sofa, my knees nearly touching my cheeks.

She straightened and glared at me. She has a doll like face, in that tight way of prostitutes. Then she sighed, and bent over the stove again.

“This stove is not working today,” she said softly, more to herself.

“Even if it was working, what would you have done about it – cook air?”

“That is why you have weals on your cheek; you have a very big mouth!”

“Lucky it’s only that, otherwise his mouth would have looked nice if I had followed in with my size tens when he was down!”

She jerked up straight and looked at me, her mouth open wide.

I gave her one of my best grins – full teeth.

Her shadow, slanted on the wall beside her, quivered as the flame of the candle suddenly strained in one direction, as if it wanted to take off the wick and go and perform its yellow dance somewhere else, somewhere very far away from us.

We kind of get along, me and her – but as a dog and a cat. She is

the dog, and I am the cat. She barks, I scratch, and we live in a truce as fragile as a strand of father's ever ready snot.

Three hours later, the door opened, and he blundered in from the night. She had already retired to bed. Dressed only in shorts, I was lying on my blankets on the floor, studying the ceiling in the weak light of the candle, and trying to restrain my empty stomach that was threatening to lunge and devour the roof beams. The door can't be locked. I tried to fix it once, but discovered that a new lock mechanism was needed. When I had told him that, he had bellowed: "Leave my door alone!"

And that was exactly what I did. As if it was his. The room. And there is nothing worth stealing inside here anyway, even the people – a new lock would be wasted.

He towered above me, behind my head. His nostrils above his moustache were like double barrels – ready to blast. His thin and weak face was twisted in fury. I pointed at the ancient donkey blanket that divides the room in the middle.

"Sleep well," he said in a smiley voice, but his eyes were blazing. "I am going to kill you one day!"

Above the horrible stink of his shoes, planted on either side of my head, was also a whiff of *masese*. I knew he was coming from the beer-garden. Nothing can keep this man from there, not even the knowledge that there is no food in his house.

"Sleep well too," I replied, flashing my teeth up at him in a smile that hid a snarl. "Just try it! I will make her laugh at you if what happened this afternoon in the street was not enough."

A round of yellow snot appeared in his left nostril, and I nearly ducked, but he did not fire it. He levered it back with a loud sniff. Then he raised his right safety boot over my head – there was a big hole in the sole, revealing a sock with a smaller hole that showed another sole, this one pink and definitely human. He walks to work everyday, he can't afford the transport, and, owning one pair of factory-issue shoes, what more could be expected of its soles?

Of uncertain character, his name is Doubt Mabhena, and he works

as a general hand at Malcolm Steel. Sometimes I feel pity for him. There is nothing in his future, and he doesn't even seem to see that, otherwise he would have invested the few pennies he earns and blows at the beer-garden, or on *chimbado*, on an education for his only son, that being me!

I crossed my right leg over my left, carelessly. I was that confident. The bottom of the shoe passed over my head. The crotch of his trousers was so shredded I felt it would rain down on me. He disappeared behind the curtain, leaving behind him a faint mouth watering aroma of fried *amacimbi*. He must have tucked them into his crotch, the not so crafty devil, because I knew all the pockets of his trousers were torn. What this man can do to economise on the food budget.

Since he had failed to stomp on me, that night, after the stealthy crunch of *amacimbi* on teeth had died down from behind the curtain, he stomped on her very hard. It seemed as if, between the hard slaps of flesh, and the creaks of the bed, he was doing it deliberately, just to spite me, maybe as revenge for the afternoon. I coughed, hawked, but he was as unstoppable as the country's recently emerged main opposition. Maybe he had also taken some *vusankunzi* at the beer-garden, because age is not now on his side.

Later that night, I woke from a troubled sleep to see her walking past my blankets in the darkness. She was dressed in a white petticoat raised from her waist to above her breasts like a mini dress. A moment later, there was the sound of her water roaring into the toilet bowl, followed by the tight tear of belly gas, as if it was the dawn Freedom Train whistling in the distance to the country's penniless labour force to wake up and hurry to the yokes.

"I greeted him and he did not reply," Craig said the following afternoon. "What's biting your father?"

"Leave that man alone, you will catch his madness." The walls of Craig's sitting room are plastered and painted a liberating blue. I helped him do that a month ago.

"And your stepmother is such a nice woman," he said.

I looked at him suspiciously. Above his seat was a framed batik of a hut on a green background, the yellow sickle of a moon smiling over its roof. "I don't know about that."

I remembered father in the morning grumbling to MaNyoni that Craig should go back to his people.

"Leave him alone," she had replied. "Why don't *you* go to his people?"

"I am not white," father had replied over his porridge. "This is the township."

When he is home he sits on the old and worn sofa that I sit on when he is not there. And he was sunk so deep in it that he couldn't place his plate on the tiny table in front of him, but had it on his knees over a torn bible that used to belong to mother, which she must have forgotten the day she unshackled herself from this house, and her marriage.

"And he is not black," I had quipped, temporarily taking sides with MaNyoni, and she had cast me a surprised look from her reed mat beside father. I was standing at the corner of the room next to the stove, which father had fixed early in the morning, also eating porridge.

"Shut up, *nja!*" he had yelled at me. "I will hit you if you talk to me as if you are squatting behind a bush!"

I had laughed, and his plate had nearly scissored my Afro hairstyle, but flew by to clang on the wall. I knew he was still sore about yesterday. All because of a lousy plate of *sadza* and tripe.

"He must change, this is the twenty first century for goodness sake!"

"If he is not speaking to you, just ignore him, you lose nothing." I tried to console him. Father must have really put him off. It's a rare thing to hear Craig complain like that. He must have finally caught the township virus.

"But I was not brought up like that," Craig said. This week he was not working. We spend almost all of his days off together. It was hot, the windows were all open, the curtains pulled back, but it seemed as if the wind was shy of blowing in and blowing out the marijuana haze that pervaded the room.

“Maybe he suspects you of something.” I suspect him too, but I don’t mind. Beer-garden women are not right in the head. That’s where father brought her home from the night after mother went away. I have not forgiven him for that. And he seems not to have forgiven me either for not going with mother. But why should I have? Because, I mean – pretty soon I knew mother would be having another man like all normal women with singing blood, father clean forgotten from her head, and I would rather share a house with a man who owes me, just like father, but not vice versa. Father owes giving birth to me, and I will never let him off that hook, no matter how hard he tries to squirm. And when he made poor mother leave her marriage, in my heart I had said “*two*.”

“But I have told you many times that I do not concern myself with things like that, Ndla.”

“I do not mean that.”

“We are all brothers, that is why I chose to come and stay here, just to show that these things,” he pinched the skin of his arm, “do not matter.”

“I do not mean that!” I repeated.

“I am serious.”

“You are right,” I was grinning. “Sometimes I wish I could stay in the suburbs, but it is so expensive.”

He laughed. I like his laugh. It’s a genuine one, nothing lurking behind it, like in mine. Sometimes my laugh scares me. There is something so depressing about it. As if when I laugh I am trying to startle whatever it is out of it.

The first day he moved in next door, he came by lorry, the back piled high with his things – bed, wardrobe, TV and all. He had just bought the house. The previous owners, debt ridden, had sold it and fled the township, never to be seen again. Father one day had announced that they were now squatting at the main railway station, something I discarded as a lie. That can’t happen to a person can it? Not even in a country as crazy as this one. And I know father too well – he delights

in grinding people's names under his thumb, as if they are the lice that infest the walls of our room, just as he is attempting to do with Craig's these days. Sometimes I wonder why he does that, because there is nothing important about him, just thin air.

The lorry had stopped at the gate, and he had jumped to the ground from the driver's door. My mouth had gaped open in surprise. A white man in an army uniform! That was indeed a sight as rare to see this side of Independence as the belly button of a frog. He had stood for a moment looking at his new house, his face expressionless, and then it had broken into a broad smile. I had been sitting in the shade of the lemon tree in our yard, contemplating my life over a joint, as I do almost every day. My life is like a solid wall – impassable. I think that is what makes me smoke so much, because, after a joint, somebody from within me, somebody stronger than me, comes out, takes my hand and leads me easily past the wall.

Up and down the line of houses, people were standing at their gates, staring at him. They never miss anything. They don't want to. I was alone in the house that day, all the other lodgers we share the house with off to their various daily occupations. MaNyoni had been off to wherever I don't know.

He had raised his hand at me, and I had waved back.

He had walked to the house, unlocked the door, and gone inside. I had watched Ndlovu, an elderly man who, years ago, used to be a lodger in the house in which we live, but had moved next door, detach himself from his gate and head for the back of the lorry, and I had walked out of mine and cut him off.

"Get out of my way!" he had snarled at me between clenched teeth, his felony eyes slitted.

"*Ftsek!*" I was also bristling. I guess maybe I was scared the blame would fall on me, since I was the nearest to the truck, and not so popular at home.

I remember Ndlovu used to be kind to me and mother a long time back, when I was six years old or so. I remember one morning he had given

mother money to buy *Coca Cola* when father was away at work, and mother had sent me to the store for it. On the way there, I had tripped and the empty coke bottle had fallen from my hand and smashed into pieces on a stone. I had rushed back home to get another one, because I so much wanted the soft drink, which was a rare delicacy – father never bought any for us, except once a year, on Christmas day. I had come to our door, and tried to open it without knocking, but discovered that it was locked.

“Mama!” I had called out. “The *Coca Cola* bottle has broken.”

She had come to the door, wearing a wrap around her body – I had left her in clothes, and this was the way she dressed when getting out of bed or going to bath. She had silently given me another bottle and shut the door. Then I had decided to get a plastic bag to carry the bottle in. I had tried to open the door and, to my surprise, discovered it locked again. I had gone to the window and peeped through a rent in the curtain, but mother was out of sight behind the blanket that divided the room.

“Mama!” I had called out. “I need a plastic bag.”

The blanket had parted, and she had appeared from behind it, tying the wrap around her body. Behind her, a naked Ndlovu was lying on the bed, his stick pointing stiffly up at the ceiling. Fuck!

“*Salibonani*,” a nasal voice had greeted us from behind. He was back. And he spoke fluent Ndebele. “The name is Craig.”

He had extended his hand to Ndlovu first, who had folded both of his behind his back. I had quickly taken the hand to cover up for him.

“Ndla,” I had said. I don’t like my full name. It’s Ndhlala.

Ndlovu had been walking away, sore at his missed chance. I knew he would not forgive me for that. He had come out of jail a few months back after an eight year stretch for burglary. Right now nobody knew what he was doing, but neighbours were complaining that, ever since his release, walking around Emakhandeni Township at night was no longer so safe.

Craig was looking at Ndlovu’s back, the corners of his eyes creased

in amusement. “Thanks,” he had said. “I was so excited at being here I left this unguarded.” He had pointed at the back of the truck.

“It’s partly that,” Craig said, wiping laughter tears from his eyes. “Why should I pay through my nose to rent in the suburbs when there are cheaper and nice houses like these around?” He lit a cigarette.

“He is a poor one,” father had told MaNyoni that night Craig had moved in. “Pretending he doesn’t mind where he stays – stupid. We know.” He had chortled.

“Nice houses!” I said, studying his face. MaNyoni can’t pronounce his name properly, and calls him Crag, and aptly said. His face must have been made when God was dreaming of granite – corners on the cheeks and on his chin, flat brow and eyes that flash crystal green when light hits them.

“These are nice.” He was looking around the room with dreamy eyes. “Come on Ndla, they are not a stress on the mind.”

“Not a stress?”

“Ndlala!” MaNyoni’s voice yelled outside.

“I want to escape all this,” I blurted out, the corners of my eyes suddenly feeling moist. “But I don’t know in which direction, and it drives me crazy.”

He nodded his head, his brow furrowed.

“But I also know that distant mountains look good from afar,” I went on.

“But getting there is progress,” he said. “The heart needs that also.”

“Ndlala!” MaNyoni’s voice called again.

“Better go,” Craig said.

“I don’t want!”

“Your mother is calling you, Ndla.” He has never called me by my full name. I don’t know how he fathomed it out – that I hate it. It means hunger in Ndebele. At least Ndla is meaningless. And I am always so hungry.

“She is not my mother,” I said. “My mother is homeless right now because of that—”

“Please not that,” he cut in.

“Crag! Tell that useless boy that I want him!”

“Oops,” Craig said, grinning. “She wants you man.”

“I am not her husband.”

But I went out of the house, frowning. She was standing at the dividing fence, a sack of maize seed at her feet.

“You want food?” she asked, one hand on her hip. She was wearing tight yellow hipsters. “Go to the grinding mill right now and you will get it.”

I glared at her.

“Let’s go together,” Craig’s voice said from behind me. “I can use the walk.”

“Let him go alone. He must work if he wants to eat. We don’t want loafers here, but thinkers.” She rapped her temple with a finger, as if *she* could think. Her face was a sickly yellow from skin lightener abuse.

I looked at her, suddenly smiling. I felt her body tense.

“Let’s go Ndla,” Craig said quickly, and his hand settled on my shoulder. “Your mother is joking, can’t you see that?”

“Your stepmother is such a nice woman,” I parroted as I wheeled his bicycle across the township. The sack of maize seed was strapped to the carrier.

“I understand your problems with her,” Craig said. “But honest, she is nice to me.” He was looking at the sky, his nostrils dilated, as if he was scenting the wispy clouds that sailed the vast expanse.

The day he moved in, I had helped offload his things from the lorry and carry them into the house. He also had a *Humber* bicycle.

“This is *Tsholobela*,” he had said, grinning, as he wheeled it into the house. I had raised my eyebrows at him. “The lorry belongs to a friend; I am taking it back tomorrow.”

And the following morning the lorry was not there. He had come back walking in the afternoon, then had taken his bicycle and ridden off. When he came back at sunset, he had told me over the fence that he had been touring the township, just to see his new territory.

“And what did you see?” I had asked him.

“Plenty,” he had replied. “The girls are so nice. They all greeted me.”

“Are you sure it was not because of something else?”

“Why?”

“They never greet me.”

He had looked at me strangely, but did not say anything.

“I left the suburbs because I wanted to escape,” Craig said suddenly as we approached the shopping centre where the grinding mill is. “My father once owned a shop in town, but when inflation hit he went bust.”

It was that crazy hour of the day when nearly all the township folk swarm the streets that cut between the crowded rows of matchbox size houses. I looked at Craig’s face, but he was looking straight ahead, his face devoid of expression. I did not say anything – the man wanted to talk.

“My father started drinking heavily, then he did a stupid thing. One day he gassed himself in the garage in his car. My mother quickly followed after that, because of a broken heart. I was already in the army then, ten years. Then one day my rich uncle came home, I was staying with a girlfriend, and he says to me,” his voice rose to falsetto, “How can you?”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because of the army thing.”

“And what did you say?”

“I was a soldier before all this nonsense started, and I am going to be a soldier after it has gone. I love the job, I can’t do anything else. Then, the most painful thing – the day I came to the township, my girlfriend said we were through.”

“She didn’t love you.”

“You think so?”

“Maybe she did.”

“And strangely, ever since I arrived here and discovered all these nice people, I feel so free, just like my old self again.”

Once father spent two days without coming home. On the third morning, a tearful mother had pleaded that I go and make a report to the police that he was missing – maybe something dreadful had happened to him.

“Let’s phone Malcolm Steel first,” I had said. We had made the call from the phone box. That was three years ago. I was sixteen, just out of high school, and raring to conquer life. Somebody at the other end of the phone had said father was at work. Mother had taken the phone and asked to speak to him. She had waited and waited, and had finally hung up when the line was cut.

“I am going there,” she had said. She had asked for money for the fare from next door, and had gone to his work place. When she came back in the afternoon, she had aged twenty years, and she was not speaking. Then that night, her mouth had opened, and she had told me. When she had arrived at Malcolm Steel, she had seen him, and he had told her that he was coming the following night with another woman who was going to be his second wife, because he wanted another child which she was failing to give him. The following day, when I woke up, she was gone.

That same night, father came with MaNyoni. He was carrying a *scud*, and they had planted themselves in the ‘sitting’ room and shared it. I did not say anything, but had just sat on the pile of my blankets under the window, staring murder at them, but they had completely ignored me. It was not the first time I had seen MaNyoni. I knew her from the beer-garden, where she sold her ‘wares’ to drunks.

Finally, late in the night, they had retired behind the curtain. MaNyoni had arrived.

“You should join the army, they are recruiting next month,” Craig said

as we walked back from the grinding mill. “I can talk to somebody there who has influence.”

“And go and shoot people I have no fight with?”

“Forget that Ali stuff man. It’s a job. You will get respect at home.”

“Not for me.”

“What about the National Youth Service? It will keep you occupied, and you don’t go to war.”

“And throw stones at the white farmers while the children of shefs get premature potbellies at Fort Hare University?”

“We were not born the same.”

“No one was born through the anus.”

“I give up,” he said. “Bring *Tsholobela*, let me wheel her.”

I gave him the bicycle.

“He didn’t want to go to the grinding mill,” MaNyoni yelled as I came into the room, the bag of *mealie meal* heavy on my shoulder. “He just wants to eat like a pregnant grasshopper.”

“Is that true, *wena*?” he shouted drunkenly from the sofa. She sat on the floor beside him, a *scud* before her. I was surprised to find him in so early. Then I remembered that on Thursdays and Fridays he now worked half days. Malcolm Steel was teetering on the verge of collapse – as almost all factories, because of this inflation business.

To their astonished faces, I lifted the sack of *mealie meal* above my head and bashed it down. It burst, and a white cloud of mealie dust filled the room.

He caught up with me in the street. When I turned to face him – he slapped me. A mosquito whining crazily in my ear, the slaps of yesterday leapt into my mind. That plate of *sadza*.

I had come home in the afternoon from watching street soccer, and MaNyoni was busy cooking. With the prospect of a meal, and as hungry as I was, I had, as usual, decided not to wait in the room for her to complete her cooking, but had gone for a walk. Two hours later, I was back, and had found her cleaning the stove. As I came in she went

out. I had opened the pots, to discover there was no food in them, although a mouth watering smell lingered in the room. She came back, and told me that she was going to visit a friend. Left alone, I had traced the smell of the food beyond the curtain into their bedroom. A single bed stood against the wall at the far end. There had been no sign of plates. The smell had led me under the bed. I had been very hungry, I had only eaten sugarless morning porridge for the past two days. I had discovered his plate under the bed. I had taken it and gobbled down all the food on it.

Afterwards, I had gone to stand at the street corner, and that's where he had caught up with me. And where his falling down had amused the street vendors.

I laughed. His face twisted, and he lunged at me with his boot. I side-stepped, and he flew past and fell into the ditch. Never have the vendors laughed so much. They will miss our family the day we move from the street when Malcolm Steel finally collapses, as it is bound to, and the owner of the house we lodge in chases us out for failure to pay rent. I wonder where we will go to – *eeish!*

Dancing with Life

Today, as the beleaguered President is once again flying East, Mxolisi is also flying, but West – over a low wire fence and into a yard.

Dressed in green overalls, he lands nimbly on the other side, and races past the house, headed for the back, the soles of his sneakers flashing orange behind him. As on most afternoons, a steely sky tightly lids the township, as if it would suddenly lift, let out a puff of steam and the stink of decaying dreams into the beyond, then a shovel prod in to flip this life over into a fresh and purposeful side.

“Stop!” A policeman, mounted on a bike, shouts at him from the street in a harsh voice that has been highly trained to instil fear and, once, instant obedience. But today, the voice, like the country’s much-touted myriad economic turnaround programmes, fires another blank. Mxolisi is clambering over a tall brick wall behind the house – he disappears over it into another yard. The alarmed cluck of chickens from the other side greets his disappearance.

The policeman, unable to follow on his bike, races along the street to cut off Mxolisi on the other side of the row of houses.

Mxolisi appears from a gate into the street this side of the houses, walking slowly, and now dressed in black sports shorts and a white vest that reveals a sinewy body. He is whistling a Second Chimurenga song, whose lyrics he has never bothered himself with, as most disillusioned urban youngsters these days.

At 21, he has a small funny spade-like head that, uncannily, resembles that of a lizard, hence his nickname, Mpankwa, meaning lizard in Ndebele. His eyes are protruding and are always bloodshot from the *mbanje* he chain smokes – just like those of *ntikoloshis* from stories grandmothers scare unruly children with at night. An ex-university student whose laugh can make any person want to laugh too, Mxolisi tossed honesty over his shoulder a couple of years back, after that infamous election scam that perpetuated, as he often curses, ‘official looting’. Now he dances with life daily outside the township sports bar peddling *mbanje* and, with a shrewd squint in his right eye,

providing articulate overviews of the country's political scenario to other loafers, the majority of whose intellectual scope is limited to petty gossip, and just farting around.

Mxolisi had found the policeman behind Figa Sports Bar assaulting his best friend Juluka with fists and boots for drinking a scud in public, and, from a distance, had shouted in his most taunting voice, "*Wena!* Leave that man alone! Can't you see he is not a white farmer?"

"Ah!" the policeman had gasped in astonishment. Then he had picked up his bike lying on the ground, leapt on it, and, without much ceremony, the chase of the week had been officially launched.

Suddenly, the policeman races around the corner in front of Mxolisi, who whistles the Chimurenga song louder.

The policeman brakes to a stop in front of him.

"Did you see a thin fellow in green overalls?" the policeman asks, wiping sweat off his brow, one brown booted foot balancing on the ground, the other cocked on a pedal. He is younger than Mxolisi, but is fitter, and taller.

Mxolisi points up the street, his lips pursed in a whistle. The policeman races in the pointed direction, bent on national retribution, his neon police bib shining brightly in the sun.

A stray dog, as emaciated as drought prone Tsholotsho infants, leaps out of a yard and chases after the bicycle, barking fiercely. A few steps away, it turns back and disappears into another yard, satisfied that it has expressed its displeasure at whoever killed the country's economy and made food scarce from the township bins from which it scavenges.

Virginia watches the policeman cycling hard towards her, and the chasing dog turning away from him. Behind him, Mxolisi is walking in the opposite direction, making hard for the corner of the street, now and then darting looks over his shoulder.

Virginia hates Mxolisi. She also wishes him ill. Two weeks back, he had been intimate with her in the public toilet behind Figa Sports Bar,

and, afterwards, in the faeces smelling darkness, had given her a roll of money. She had charged him two hundred thousand dollars, because, she had hotly argued when he had tried to haggle, his pants around his knees – things were going up by a million per cent every minute in the country – just look at the cost of sending a child to school now! She had a daughter at primary school.

Back inside the dimly lit sports bar, standing in her favourite corner in front of a large mirror that enabled her, now and then, to turn her back to the room so the patrons could see her abundant posterior, her strongest marketing point, and she also their faces in the reflection, Virginia had counted Mxolisi's money, and discovered that it had all been counterfeit. When she had confronted him outside the sports bar where he peddled his *mbanje*, he had clicked his tongue at her, “Nx! If the state is daily printing money that does not buy anything, who are you to complain about my money? You can go and make a report to the police right now if you want – your *gorilla* was not even nice.”

She dare not report him. She knew she would be charged for soliciting. Just last Friday, she had come out of the nightclub at closing time, only to discover, to her shock, policemen ambushing all unaccompanied women at the door and bundling them into a waiting police van. They had all been carted to the police station, where she had spent an unpleasant night in a crowded cell, and in the morning was made to pay a fine for soiling the respected name of the country's newly introduced currency, the bearer cheque, by making men ejaculate inside her in order to fill her bra with them. To add to the insult, the bearer cheques even had the highly esteemed Reserve Bank Governor's signature on them!

When the policeman reaches her, she points over his shoulder back at Mxolisi, who is almost at the corner.

“That's him,” she whispers to the policeman. “He has taken off his overalls.” Her face is concealed by a floppy sun hat and large dark sunglasses. She has a good body, revealed by tight pink pants and a matching vest that leaves her belly button in the open. A small patch of curly dark hairs trails from below the navel into the pants.

Mxolisi, nearly at the street corner, darts another look over his shoulder. The policeman is bearing down on him, seeming to become larger and larger on his bike. Behind him, he can see that bitch Virginia standing watching him – he breaks into a run.

He turns the corner, his feet flying. Everything is now a blur, the houses, the people he passes.

“Mpankwa!” he hears a familiar voice call, but he has no time for it. He rounds another corner, darts into an open gate, past the house, and comes to a stone wall. He stops running, his shoulders drooping in disappointment. The wall has jagged pieces of broken bottle lining its top, imbedded into the concrete.

There is the thud of boots, and the policeman bursts into view.

A hard clap cracks into Mxolisi’s right cheek – he blocks a fist centring for his stomach.

“What’s happening here?” a shirtless man shouts in an angry voice from the corner of the house. “Please get out of my yard. I don’t want any dead bodies here.”

Mxolisi is now in handcuffs, and the policeman drags him around the house and out of the gate. A crowd has gathered outside, so many people, especially kids and women, and some still pouring from the surrounding houses, just like mice out of a burrow flooded with hot water.

“Leave Mpankwa alone,” somebody shouts. It is Juluka. “He is my friend, he has done nothing.” Juluka is holding an empty scud container.

“Yes, release him,” a woman also shouts.

More and more people appear running.

“The country is being raped by men with big stomachs and you are wasting time arresting people spending their honestly earned money,” a man, carrying pestles that he sells around the township, cries out. “This is your thank you to us for providing your salaries.”

The policeman and Mxolisi are now surrounded.

“Open the way please,” the policeman says. “Don’t start something you are not going to finish.”

“We are going to finish it,” the crowd roars back in defiance, and a puppy barks from its midst.

Suddenly, four other policemen, all mounted on bikes, cut into the crowd, and it withdraws.

“It doesn’t matter how many of you there are,” Juluka shouts from the safety of the back of the crowd, waving the scud container in the air. “We are not your wives. Go and fuck somebody else in your cells!”

One of the policemen throws his bicycle down and leaps for Juluka. He trips on a stone, and falls down in a cloud of dust. The crowd roars in laughter and catcalls. The policeman leaps up and races after Juluka, then suddenly stops and turns back, his hand on his belt. His eyes are on the ground, searching.

“What is it?” another policeman asks him.

“My handcuffs,” the first policeman replies in a low voice.

The four policemen, watched by the laughing crowd, search the ground, kicking over the soil, especially where the first policeman had fallen, but no handcuffs are to be found. They finally give up the search, and lead Mxolisi away.

“It’s me who showed the policeman that Gwababa’s son,” Virginia is telling Juluka as they sit on the stones under the shade of the thorn tree behind Figa Sports Bar. “My thing is not forged like his money, even big shots know that, and the money they give me Juluka...”

Juluka pulls on a joint, then pinches his nostrils closed, his lips and eyes also closed. He keeps the smoke in for a few seconds, then opens his eyes, releases his nostrils, and blows the smoke out in a steady stream through his mouth. He passes the joint to Virginia.

“It will never end,” Virginia says, smoking. “I don’t forget that easily. Nobody puts his stick into me for free and gets away with it.”

“But you enjoyed also,” Juluka says, his eyes on the curls under Virginia’s belly button.

“He is selling shit too,” Virginia says. She holds the joint up. “What is this?” She takes another pull. “Even guava leaves are better. Is he not ashamed of himself?”

“Where are the handcuffs?” Juluka asks.

Virginia pulls the front of her pants open, revealing the handcuffs sitting on her crotch over a pair of red knickers with a white heart on the front. She takes them out and covers herself again. “They are for sale,” she says. “Find a buyer *tshomi*. I need the money.”

“Who would want to buy handcuffs?” Juluka ponders. “Throw them away, they are as useless as our MP whom we only see driving past in a nice twin cab – how I wish I could just wash that car.”

“Go and clean your mother’s behind first.” She returns the handcuffs to their hiding place, and passes the joint to him. “I will keep them at my place, they are a donation from the state to poverty.”

“Arrest poverty,” says Juluka, his eyes dreamy. “Lock it in hand and foot cuffs, dump it into a cell and throw the keys into a very deep river.” His chest sounds like a burst drum with phlegm as he lets out a staccato bass laugh.

“*Wuwi!*” Virginia adds her loud soprano laugh, and passers-by turn to stare, some shaking their heads, for they can never understand how productive young people can spend their days loitering at a liquor outlet when so much needs to be done.

A handcuffed Mxolisi trots along a path in a bushy area of the township, headed for the police station. Behind him slowly cycles the policeman who had arrested him. The other four policemen had left them to go and prowl somewhere.

“Stop,” the policeman growls behind him.

Mxolisi stops and turns around. The policeman has dismounted from his bicycle and laid it on the ground.

A slap cracks into Mxolisi’s cheek.

“Repeat it,” the policeman says, and slaps him again on the same cheek. Tears spring into Mxolisi’s eyes. Another slap. “Repeat what you said, damn you!” the policeman shouts, his eyes on fire.

A lizard darts into the path from the undergrowth, stops, and cocks its head their way. It contemplates them for a brief moment, then darts across the path into the undergrowth, startled by the crack of another

slap on the human with a head similar to its own. He must have been one of us in a past age, it is thinking.

The policeman slaps Mxolisi twice more on both cheeks. "I feel pity for you," he says. He takes out a key from his trouser pocket and unlocks Mxolisi's handcuffs.

"Go!" he says, and boots him on the buttocks. Mxolisi flees into the wood away from the path, leaping over bushes, the policeman shouting behind him: "If I catch you again..."

"He is not a white farmer!" Mxolisi shouts back, now running hard. He falls into a gully that has sewer water flowing in it, scrambles up, and runs on, his clothes dripping wet, and finally disappears behind an outcrop of rocks.

The policeman, swearing in a low voice, takes out a crumpled cigarette pack from his trouser pocket. He shakes out a half smoked joint, lights it and has a smoke. A few minutes later, he is mounted and cycling away, scowling deeply.

"What is this?" MaNdlovu shouts at Mxolisi as soon as he enters the sitting room from the kitchen. He has used the back door. She is holding up a 2 kg sugar bag. Inside it are twists of *mbanje*. On the table in front of her sofa are stacks of money, and next to them are Mxolisi's crumpled green overalls.

"Somebody wants petrol outside," Mxolisi mutters to his mother. His clothes are wet, and flies are buzzing around him. He opens his bedroom door and disappears inside, leaving behind him the stink of raw sewage.

"One day I am going to kill this dog!" MaNdlovu shouts to an empty room, her nose wrinkled against the stink. She places the *mbanje* on the table, just as Ngulube comes in from the kitchen. He has a kitchen knife in one hand and a tomato in the other.

"Did you ask him about that money?" he asks MaNdlovu, wiping his sweaty brow with the back of the hand carrying the tomato.

"Just because he has grown a beard he thinks he owns this house," MaNdlovu says. She is a huge woman with big hunched up shoulders

that make her look as if she is going to throw a punch at any time. Her head, like her son's, is also spade-like, but her eyes are not as big. "I do everything for him, but still, it is useless!" she rages. Her cheeks are blemished from a childhood skin disease.

"It's him who took that money I tell you, but you keep saying it's me." Ngulube is handsome looking, but in a weak way.

A car hoots sharply outside.

"Shut up and go and attend to that customer," MaNdlovu snaps at him, taking a stack of money from the table and beginning to count it. "And I don't want to hear anything about that money again. I try to help people, but..." She shrugs her shoulders, her lower lip curled down. "They will learn about life when I am no longer there for them."

"But honey, I am cooking." Ngulube wails.

"You now want to go back to your wife? Can't you see I am counting money?"

Without replying, Ngulube lays the knife and tomato on a side table and walks out of the front door.

A cell-phone crows from the table. MaNdlovu picks it up.

"Hallo?" she enquires.

"Inspector," a voice says into her ear. "This is Sergeant Nkomo at the station. A hot tip has just come in. Somebody is selling black-market petrol..."

"Enemies of the state," she promptly declares into the mouthpiece. "Wait for me. I am coming over right now – we are going to pick up the swine."

Ngulube is busy cutting a tomato into a pot of meat on the four plate stove. He stirs it with a tablespoon, then, finished, puts the lid on. A spicy smell fills the kitchen.

"Where is mother?" Mxolisi asks from the sitting room door. Ngulube turns and looks at him, wiping his hands on a tablecloth. Mxolisi is now dressed in clean clothes – jeans and a t-shirt, his face fresh from a bath.

"She has gone on duty, but she will be back soon." Ngulube does

not look at Mxolisi's face. Mxolisi goes to the refrigerator and takes a coke bottle from it.

"Why did you tell her I took that money?" Mxolisi demands, opening the coke with his teeth. "Don't think I didn't hear you. Is that what you came to sleep with mother here for?"

"What kind of a child are you?" Ngulube is bristling with anger. He is older than Mxolisi by twenty five years, but they are of the same height.

"Gives you status to be the boyfriend of an Inspector, doesn't it *chef?*"

"No wonder they chased you out of university. You have a very dirty mind."

"Ah, so says the wife deserter."

"I will hit you if you disrespect me."

"I will hit you if you dithrethpect me." Mxolisi echoes him with a lisp, his mouth twisted. "And I will phone the police station and make a report to the Inspector!" He drinks the coke halfway in one thirsty swig.

Ngulube is now very angry. Mxolisi sees his hand straying to the knife on the table, and throws a last punch, "Your *shamwari* has gone to *buy* more petrol for both of you to make more money out of, while your wife and children are queuing at Social Welfare for free *mealie meal*."

Mxolisi disappears from the kitchen door into the sitting room, still carrying the coke.

"Gecko!" Ngulube mutters to himself, and looks out of the kitchen window. Directly facing it is the ex-chicken coop, a low brick affair topped with wire mesh and roofed with asbestos. This is where the black market petrol is stashed. There had been one full twenty-litre container there, but now it is gone. He dashes out of the door into the back yard. The house is enclosed by a red brick wall. He looks in the chicken coop. The container is definitely no longer there. Five empty ones are lying outside the coop. He races around the house to the front gate, opens it and goes out. Mxolisi is walking up the street, one hand

in pocket, the other carrying the coke. Suddenly remembering the pot on the stove, Ngulube dashes back into the house. He is now frightened. What is MaNdlovu going to say when she comes back?

Mxolisi finds Juluka standing at the street corner. It is now twilight, the cloudless sky a blue-grey, just waiting for darkness and for God to flip on the stars and mankind their vices. A cool wind is blowing away the heat of the afternoon.

“Where is it?” he asks Juluka, taking a sip of coke.

“In the maize field next to the bus stop. You took long to come?” Juluka holds his hand out to Mxolisi, who gives him the nearly finished coke.

“Should I have taken a shorter time?”

“I heard you telling him through the kitchen window.” There is laughter in Juluka’s eyes. He finishes the coke, and hands back the empty bottle to Mxolisi. “Ta my buddy.”

“Did I tell him any lies?”

“Only the truth, and enough to stop him looking behind him out of the kitchen window. But Mxolisi, what about your mother?”

“If she wants to report the theft, let her go ahead. At least you and me will be together in the cells. Let’s go and look for a buyer.”

“Ngulube took your overalls from my father who saw you hide them in our bin when the policeman was chasing you. Did he give them back to you?” They are now walking in the direction of the bus stop.

“I don’t know what I should do about that squatter,” Mxolisi replies. “I don’t want him at home. His family needs him more than my mother. Tell me Juluka, how can an old woman like that like sex so much? And to make matters worse,” his voice lowers, “you know my father died from AIDS.”

The Matchstick Man

His feet a blur that seemed not to touch the tar, the Matchstick Man flew along the street. Behind him chased a police car, siren baying, and its roof light flashing red murder. On either side of the street, like daring spooks, other red flashing lights chased other Matchstick Men on jerky shop window reflections.

As the street suddenly writhed into a turn, he slipped on a banana peel, tumbled down, and skidded forward on his stomach, the tar shredding his dungarees in a loud abrasive screech. He shot straight on out of the turn and into Independence Square.

A gold statue of Her Excellency, astride a rearing black granite bull, was mounted in the middle of a stretch of dry grass, right in his path. Behind it smiled the country's palace, built of pink marble, with its door guarded by two lions in diamond-studded leather collars. The lions were licking their lips – they had just devoured a little boy dressed in an opposition party t-shirt who had dared pass by the door. Around them were scattered tufts of human hair, dentures, toenails, and the head of a penis. The latter, blitzed by furious bottle-green flies, was flipping around like a lizard's freshly cut off tail.

The Matchstick Man slammed into the plinth, head first. There was a loud cracking sound, like a gunshot, and his head burst into sizzling red flame. The granite bull bellowed in alarm, leapt from the plinth, over the flames, and thundered towards the door of the palace, clods of soil from its hooves raining behind it. The alert lions already had the door open. Gold and granite disappeared through it, and the two lions slammed the door shut.

Fanned before a ferocious wind, flames raced hungrily across the dry grass following the scars of the bull's spoor, smoke and ash swirling thickly above them.

They beat the fire with acid statements in the state media. They tear-gassed it, set police dogs on it, truncheoned it, shot at it, and, finally, the two lions subdued it at the palace door. They put it in a straitjacket, raked its face with their sharp claws, drawing blood, then

carted it away still struggling to an unnamed grave deep in the sacred forest behind the palace, in which, it was rumoured, resided the maimed spirits of silencing.

‘There is no cure!’ the media bansheed. Her Excellency appeared on the lofty tower of the palace, a pair of tiny horns jutting from her forehead, singing the ‘No Cure’ anthem in a deep male voice. Drums beat across the orange sky, horns trumpeted, and feet stamped. The blue sun closed its ears with its fingers, its face a grimace. Then, displeased, it strode west over the border of the horizon, and darkness prematurely opened its terrible mouth over the capital.

One unsuspecting afternoon, the Matchstick Man re-appeared on the streets, wearing a red t-shirt emblazoned with ‘Will Anything Ever Change?’ in white on the front. In his hand he carried an aluminium briefcase. His eyes burned with a cold defiant fire from his black charred face. A faint sulphurous smell emanated from him. Borne on a powerful current not felt on the ground, election campaign leaflets raced overhead on light wings like the scattered thoughts of the hungry.

The Matchstick Man opened his mouth in dismay at the sight that met his eyes. He only had two front teeth, both on his lower jaw. Obese rats, clad in long leather jackets, felt hats, and dark sunglasses, strutted about the streets, double barrelled shotguns balanced over their shoulders. Infants with emaciated faces peeped with dead eyes from the broken windows of buildings. Dogs bayed in the rubbish-strewn alleys, and the sun, arms akimbo, the corners of its eyes moist, squinted at the Matchstick Man from the sky with hope in its heart.

The Matchstick Man clicked his briefcase open, took out a sheaf of papers from inside, and closed it again. Then, frowning heavily, he glared at the statue of Her Excellency. In her smouldering eyes was reflected the double image of a stooped old man about to cast a vote into a transparent ballot box emblazoned ‘Uhuru’ in rainbow colours on one side. A cock in militia uniform held a pistol to the back of the old man’s head. The old man cast his vote, and then jumped into the slit after it. The cock grinned and, with a magician’s flourish, sealed the slit

with masking tape. It fluffed its feathers, cocked its head and crowed lustily. Then it lugged the ballot box onto its shoulder, and the double image strutted away deeper into the eyes of the statue and then vanished.

The Matchstick Man rifled through his papers, his brow furrowed in intense thought. The two lions guarding the door of the palace were pumping dumb-bells, sweat coursing down their swollen muscles. The sun coughed, and a momentary blue heat wave scorched the earth. The Matchstick Man wiped sweat off his brow and approached the statue, a defiant look on his thin wooden face. A starved looking red locust was looking into a hand mirror on the plinth, sharpening its teeth with a whetstone.

A siren wailed, and a red fire engine slewed around the corner, tyres squealing, and raced towards him. The Matchstick Man stood his ground. It skidded to a halt in front of him. The buildings on either side of Independence Square straightened their shoulders, and all became deathly silent. One could even have heard the footstep of the ant that stood with one foot poised in mid air at the side of the plinth had it decided to step forward. Its eyes, a look of dread in them, were fixed on the fire engine, its mouth half open.

“What do you want?” the Matchstick Man shouted at the fire engine.

“I have come to put out your fire – orders from above!” the fire engine shouted back. The ant, carefully, placed its foot down, then, crouched low, it slowly retreated backwards and disappeared into a crack on the side of the plinth. A grain of sand slammed into the opening of the crack from inside, sealing it.

“Where is the fire?” the Matchstick Man asked, opening his arms at the fire engine. “For I do not see it.”

“It’s in your crazy head!” The fire engine’s teeth were bared in a snarl.

“How can you put out a fire that is not yet born?” the Matchstick Man asked. “What kind of a fire engine are you?”

“Do you want to see?” The fire engine hissed and revved its engine.

Its siren started wailing, and it hunched its back, as if about to pounce, but its side door opened and six cockroaches jumped into the street from it, all carrying AK47 rifles. Standing in a neat row, they aimed at the Matchstick Man. The sun frowned, and its blue rays started windmilling slowly clockwise.

The Matchstick Man squinted at the sun, his eyebrows arched, shafts of blue light revolving across his face as if he was an extra terrestrial zebra still deciding on its colours. Then his eyes hardened, and he nodded his head, understanding the solar message. The blue rays detached from the head of the sun and floated south, hugging the flat belly of the sky like the tails of invincible kites.

“Reach for the sun!” the cockroaches all cried out at him in falsetto voices.

“Why?” the Matchstick Man asked.

“Because of orders,” one of the cockroaches replied, sliding its rifle into automatic. The others all did the same.

“But you are firemen,” the Matchstick Man’s voice was amazed. “Your job is to fight fires, not to kill innocent citizens. Are you sure you are not confused?”

“It is you who is confused,” the cockroach replied, its feet now dancing.

“We are itching for a fire-fight!” another cockroach added.

“Why do you think I am confused?” the Matchstick Man asked.

“Orders from above,” all the cockroaches chorused, all their feet also now in blurred dance.

The shotgun-toting rats appeared from the entrance of SHEFS ONLY NICE SEX MASSAGE PARLOUR. The cockroaches screeched in terror, leapt into the fire engine, which raced away, tyres squealing, and disappeared into an alley.

The rats came up to the Matchstick Man. “Are you crazy?” one of them asked, taking off its sunglasses. Its neck and wrists glittered with gold chains.

“Definitely not,” the Matchstick Man replied.

“They could have killed you. Don’t you know there is no cure for

the incurable?" the rat said, eyeing him from under the brim of its felt hat.

"I have the formula for everything incurable in this universe," the Matchstick Man responded.

The rat smiled slyly at him. "Good man," it said, hitching up its trousers. Its belt was of crocodile skin, and its silver buckle was encrusted with jewels from all corners of the universe, with a gold butterfly as the centrepiece. "Very good. Maybe, after all, there is a cure."

"Yes, it's there," the Matchstick Man said.

"You are very intelligent." The rat gave him a gold-capped smile. "Very very intelligent. You shall go far, that I can see." The gold butterfly detached itself from the rat's belt buckle and they watched it flutter up into the air. Then, in mid-air, it changed into an eagle and surged powerfully towards the sun, quickly disappearing from sight. "As far as that eagle," the rat finished, pointing at the sun with its shotgun. Then it looked at the Matchstick Man from the corners of its eyes.

The other rats lowered the brims of their hats, grunted and nodded their heads as if in support of the Matchstick Man, and also cast him oblique looks.

There was silence. In the sky, the sun took out a pair of binoculars, crouched down, and squinted through them at the group before the gold statue. The Matchstick Man was looking at the spot on the rat's belt buckle from where the butterfly had launched itself first into innocent life and then into a bird of prey. A tiny gold fly glowered back at him from there with eyes that pierced through his and out of the back of his head. The Matchstick Man screwed his eyes shut from this laser stare, but his eyes felt as if they were not there, only holes where they had been. He opened his eyelids again, and discovered that he could see. His eyes were still there, and he quickly averted them from the belt buckle.

The silence was broken by a hacking cough from a pile of leaves. The rats all swivelled around, their shotguns pointed in that direction.

The leaves convulsed. A human foetus, dressed only in farmer shoes, its body glistening with mucus, stood up from underneath the leaves and staggered away up the street. An unpleasant odour drifted to them from its direction.

“Bloody state abortion doesn’t want to die,” the rat said. It turned to the Matchstick Man. “So where is your formula, my friend?” Its voice was silky. “Maybe we can help you achieve your goal. Only AIDS has no cure – what’s eating you anyway?”

The Matchstick Man pointed at the statue with the sheaf of papers. Countless silver bees now buzzed around its head, some sitting on it, some on its shoulders, as if they were the scales of a prehistoric animal.

“I have decided to first present my petition to her, then I will go to the underworld and visit the people wherever they are hiding, because, as you can see, the streets are now empty, nobody dares walk them for fear of their lives. But life is a divine gift from the spirits that has to be lived to the full without – er, okay, let me read to you –”

The papers disappeared from his hand, as did his briefcase. He raised his eyes. The rats had disappeared too. He stood before the statue, his mouth wide open.

“Read,” sneered Her Excellency from her imperious perch on the bull. “For one with only two teeth, I see you are a very astute young man.” All the bees took off from the statue and buzzed into the sky, filling it with silver stars in broad daylight. Their shadows speckled the whole of Independence Square, making it seem as if tiny mirrors were scattered all over it.

The bull tittered. It fainted with its right hoof, the Matchstick Man ducked, and it belted him with a granite left to the forehead. The air exploded into more shiny bees, and he was hurled back and landed butt first on a patch of molten tar in the street. The tar splashed upwards, and rained down on him like inward folding petals, plastering him flat to the empty street with a single shiny blood red star sizzling in his mind.

The two lions at the palace door snarled, threw their dumb-bells down and leapt forward, muscles bunched. But they could not find the

Matchstick Man. Two eyes in the tar watched them disappear down the street, their noses casting for scent. When the lions were reduced to dots, the Matchstick Man dragged himself up from his tar bed. He was now black all over. Needle thin infants quickly gathered around him, laughing noisily, pointing fingers at him.

He walked away in the opposite direction to the lions. More needles poured from doorways, from the alleys, from manhole covers, and followed behind the Matchstick Man.

“They have not silenced me!” the Matchstick Man was raving at the air. “They will never silence me!” The air eyed him with ageless silence. “This is only a temporary set back for the army of emancipation, but it shall regroup, the commander shall scream attack, and it shall open its bibles and read virtuousness and civil rights from it, and they shall wilt and crumble before the avalanche of the stones of their words. Hearken my people, there is a cure!”

“There is no cure!” the needles behind him chanted. Their foul breath buffeted the Matchstick Man’s back, but he walked on without glancing behind him.

The rats lined the tops of the skyscrapers, their arms around angelic faced women, pointing at the Matchstick Man and squeaking in laughter. The tall rat shredded the Matchstick Man’s petition and threw the papers into the wind. Then he threw the briefcase into the sky, and all the rats took pot shots at it with their shotguns, hitting it again and again, until it was reduced to small pieces. In the distance, the sun was hard put ducking the zinging buckshot.

“There is a cure for all the man-made ills of the world!” the Matchstick Man raved, ignoring the pieces of briefcase and bits of paper raining all around him like wedding confetti. The procession left the city behind. It followed the road as it wound up into the air towards the sky along a coiled sunbeam.

“There is no cure!” the needles chanted.

“There is a cure if you want it. My papers were stolen, but I have the formula in my head, and that they shall never erase. I am going up this blue celestial road to scrawl it across the sky in big sun-letters, so

all those who bother to look up from the mire of their lives shall be saved.”

“Your gonorrhoeal prick!” Her Excellency screamed from the far distant tower of the palace that projected over the tops of the skyscrapers. Her back was stooped under the roof of the sky, making her breasts sag down, and her skirt ride high behind her, exposing the backs of veined thighs. In her hand she held her zip-zapping truncheon. The sun touched Her Excellency’s back.

“Excuse me kind mother – can I please pass?” it asked in a soft voice.

Her Excellency moved aside, still stooped. The sun walked past her after the disappearing Matchstick Man. As it passed, Her Excellency’s face tightened, and her eyes became a hyena’s, cold and glittering. She bit her lower lip and touched the back of the sun with her crackling truncheon. A white bolt of lightning flashed from the sun and lashed across the sky, followed by an ear splitting crack. Darkness swallowed the sky as the sun’s filament blew. The sun became a weakly shining moon, and it limped after the Matchstick Man along an ethereal avenue.

The Matchstick Man toiled towards the sky, now following a coiled purple moonbeam. His body was now a translucent shimmer in the darkness, and behind him the infants all carried yellow flaming torches above their heads.

“Mad man! Mad man! Mad man!” the needles chanted as they approached heaven.

Fragments

Wearily, Immaculate removed the remaining bottles of beer from the deep freezer, carefully placing them, one by one, into a red plastic crate.

The room was dirty – cigarette stubs and beer bottle tops littered the floor, and the stereo was belting out a Soul Brothers song.

The crate full, she hefted it up and headed for the kitchen, where she was going to put the beer into the refrigerator. If it remained in the freezer overnight, it would freeze. Thunder rumbled fitfully outside, as if the slab of the sky, bit by bit, was sliding open.

“Switch off the music, you!” Aunt Eliza’s voice yelled through the open door of the main bedroom. “Can’t you see there are no customers left?”

The plastic clock on the blue painted wall showed 11.30 p.m., and the last customers, a drunken elderly couple who had been openly groping on the sofa, had just staggered out.

Immaculate, twelve years of age, short of body, balanced the crate on the edge of one of the speakers and reached for the remote control, which was on top of the stereo.

As she touched it, she felt the crate slide – she let go of the remote control to save the crate, but too late – beer bottles cascaded to the floor, followed by explosions.

“Arghh!” she gasped, just as the spare bedroom door was flung open, and Dube stood there, glaring at her. Eliza was standing at the door of the main bedroom, a sheaf of money in her hands, an identical expression as her husband’s on her face, their sudden appearances as if conjured by the explosions.

The music blared on, unconcerned. Immaculate stood frozen in the middle of a frothing pool of beer and bottle shards, hands covering an open mouth, and eyes wide open.

Dube’s face contorted. He leapt at Immaculate, and his big hand exploded on her right cheek, flooring her. Quickly, he slipped off his trouser belt, and thrashed the prostrate girl’s back with it, all the time

grunting – “I am always telling you! I am always telling you!”

Immaculate scrambled to her feet amidst the belt stings. She raised her hands to cover her head, and arced her body sideways in agony as the belt cut her side.

Suddenly, she leapt at Dube and wrapped her hands around him, pinning his arms to his sides, tears streaming down her face, although no sound came from her mouth.

“What is this?” Dube’s voice was shocked. “Let go!”

A hard slap stunned Immaculate on her left cheek from behind. She looked back. It was Eliza, teeth bared in her thin shrewish face, her hand upraised again.

Immaculate released Dube, bowled Eliza over with her hands, and raced for the door. She scrambled it open, just as a bottle exploded on the wall beside it, barely missing her head. She fled out of the door and into the dark night, her exit immediately followed by an eye searing flash of lightning, and an ear splitting crack of thunder, as if it was her that had exploded out of the universe.

Dube stood at the door, his dark shadow cut into a rectangle of yellow light that spilled onto the gravelled ground from behind him.

“If I catch you I will kill you!” he shouted into the night. “Did you hear, you daughter of the devil?”

A stone rattled on the roof, the sound sharp. He leapt back into the house and slammed the door.

“Do you hear what she is doing now?” he shouted at Eliza, who was tying a piece of cloth around her right index finger. It had been cut by the broken bottle she had grabbed from the floor and thrown at Immaculate.

“She is your relative!” Eliza shouted back. “I told you long back about her and you didn’t listen to me. What is this?” She pointed at the pool of beer on the floor, sniffed and disappeared into the kitchen. She had a fist-sized posterior in tight fitting jeans, and a body like a frail blade of grass. A flaming Tina Turner wig was her sole claim to beauty.

Dube switched off the radio, and his gangling frame headed for the spare bedroom door. He opened it, and went inside. Five men were

rising from around a table in the middle of the room. On the table was a deck of playing cards. The room was thick with cigarette smoke and the sour smell of beer and sweat.

“Game’s over,” one of the men said. “We are going.”

“So early?” Dube asked, his coarse face reflecting disappointment. “But the game’s just started guys.”

“Your kid might come back with the police,” another man snorted. “You are failing to control her. One day she is going to thrash your arse, I tell you, if you don’t watch out!”

“She is going to thrash your grandmother!” Dube snapped back.

All but one of the men filed out of the door, laughing.

Dube closed the door. “The child has spoiled things for us, Khefasi,” he muttered, punching his left palm. “There was so much money on the table today!”

“Let the bastards go,” Khefasi growled in a low voice, drawing on a cigarette. “They would only have delayed us.” He was big boned, and wore a khaki sun hat pulled low over his eyes.

At the far end of the room was a single bed. On the wall at its head was a framed picture of an infant Immaculate carried in the arms of a woman in a black miniskirt, a white frilled blouse, platform shoes, huge dark sunglasses, and, as a backdrop, a studio artist’s impression of a river cascading down a cliff. The woman bore an uncanny resemblance to Dube.

Public was not a long distance truck driver by choice, but by inherited necessity.

Back in his twenties, when his blood had still been singing, he had been employed as an emergency taxi driver, doing the lucrative, so he thought then, township to city route. Then, in his early thirties, he had suddenly decided that his job was, to use his own word, ‘shit’, and he had set his sights on a long distance haulage truck, for a friend had told him it paid more, and there was also the profitable cross border smuggling included in the package.

As he only possessed a class four driver’s licence, he had tried to

get a class one, but failed the medical because of poor eyesight, a physical defect of which he had no prior knowledge. His dream threatened, he had quickly gone underground, and resurfaced with a 'clean' class one driver's licence. "Fuck the medical," he had sworn to a friend at a bar. "My money will see for me."

Equipped with the class one, he had duly got a job with a respected cross border haulage company as a truck driver. His dream fulfilled, he could be seen happily driving his truck along the major highways of Southern and Central Africa.

One night, after two months on the job, and on his eighth run, he was unlucky. He was involved in a head-on collision with a chicken bus when he had gone around a bend on the wrong side of the road. Three quarters of the bus passengers, including the bus driver, had perished when the bus flipped over and ignited. Public escaped uninjured, but shaken to the root of, so to say, his balls. His truck had veered off the road after the collision, ploughed into the bush, finally coming to a stop with the windscreen facing a giant acacia tree.

A police investigation of the accident, after a generous donation to the police benevolent fund, concluded that, alas, the bus had encroached onto Public's path, and no charges had been laid against him. The accident was duly declared a national disaster.

Public was given two months paid leave from work to recuperate. When he came back on duty again, his first job was a cross border trip to Zambia in a new truck. But, driving through the night, an unimaginable terror gripped him every time lights from oncoming traffic loomed into view. His heart beat uncontrollably, the fear nearly made him veer off the road.

With successive trips, the terror did not subside, persuading him to confide in an uncle, who suggested he consult a *nyanga* in the township.

After a few throws of his bones, Mdala, the *nyanga*, pronounced, "You have been bewitched by another driver in your company who wants your truck because it is new." Mdala was bald headed with an undecipherable glint in his eye.

Relief surged through Public, for he had believed that he was being haunted by the vengeful spirits of the poor souls who had died in the bus disaster.

"I hear you baba." Public gave the customary reply, and with alacrity.

Mdala gazed at the scattered bones, picked them up and dashed them to the ground again with a sharp clatter. He studied them, then sneezed. "Because of that, I see an accident."

"I hear you baba." Aha, thought Public, the bus disaster had been a result of the bewitching as he had suspected, not bad luck on his part. And now that he had survived the accident the *nyanga* was seeing, the bewitcher had changed tactics.

"If you are not careful, he shall achieve his goal," Mdala announced again.

"Who is it Mdala?"

"His identity is obscure because he uses powerful medicine. I can only see his actions."

"I hear you Mdala. But how can I protect myself?"

"It is very simple. We have two options. As you know, the dangerous palpitations that you feel when you are driving reside in your heart, and so that is the way of healing."

"I hear you Mdala."

"The first option is that you bring your wife here and I sleep with her once," Mdala was straight-faced, his eyes fixed on Public's. "And when I do that, you will not be angry because you will know the reason. By not becoming angry, you will banish those harmful palpitations forever."

"I hear you Mdala, but, unfortunately, I am not married."

"You are not married!" Mdala's face had registered disappointment, as if for Public. Public felt dismay. His problem was not going to be solved after all. "Then the only other way is that I give you a special charm to wear around your waist for the rest of your life."

"That will do Mdala." Public was vigorously nodding his head up and down. "That will certainly do!"

“But, the charm only works on condition that before every trip you have to sleep with a woman who is not known to you, a woman of the road, just as you are a man of the road.”

“I don’t mind that Mdala. There are plenty of women around, but, I have a problem.”

“What is that problem, my son?”

Public explained, and Mdala, with a smile, gave him a powder. Public later claimed to his friends that the powder was so potent that he felt his nose rise too.

Public asked Mdala the cost of the consultation, and Mdala dismissed him with a careless wave of his hand.

“This is work of the spirits,” Mdala said. “I don’t charge anything for it.”

Fully following Mdala’s prescription on the next trip, Public had a palpitation free journey that he enjoyed enormously. On his return, he bought a brand new suit and took it to Mdala. He sat in the winding queue outside the house waiting for his turn to see the *nyanga*, for he wanted to give him the suit as a thank-you present. There were many other grateful ex-clients in the queue, including one who carried a big colour TV to give to Mdala.

Immaculate walked through the furious rain. She did not run, or attempt to seek any shelter. She just walked along the empty street lit by tower-light, the rainwater mixing with the tears that streamed down her cheeks as the sky grieved too, her jeans and cotton sweater soaked through. In her heart burned a dark hate, so intense that it threatened to envelop her chest in flames.

There was no going back, she had told herself when she had thrown the stone at the house. A puny fist shake.

Above the sound of the rain, she heard loud singing, and quickly turned a corner, walking away from it. It came from the Community Youth Club, two blocks east, where the youth militia were camped. She was glad it was raining, for that meant they wouldn’t be patrolling the streets tonight. They had been camped there for over a month now,

since the run-up to the elections had begun. Last week Immaculate had seen them burning a house next to the shops, before the people had rallied and chased them away with stones. Then, later, two truckloads of riot police had descended on the township and beaten everybody they met in the streets.

She briefly contemplated going to them, maybe she could convince them to go and burn the home from which she was fleeing – Dube didn't deserve to live there. She felt a little satisfaction at that thought, but then decided against it. No, it had been built by her mother, and it would be disrespectful to her memory.

She heard a whimper behind her. Her heart gripped in ice, she whirled around. A white and black puppy was following her, as wet as she was. She stopped and clicked her fingers at it. It came to her, hesitantly, as if it didn't trust her – and raised its nose to her hand. She stroked its head.

"Homeless like me in the rain?" she whispered, bent over it. A rushing stream of water chuckled insanely in the gully at the side of the road as the rain pounded on.

The puppy whimpered again in return.

A car turned into the street behind her, its lights, crossed by glittering slanting raindrops, blinding.

Immaculate found herself scooting into the gateless yard of a house and hiding behind a hibiscus hedge, knee deep in a rushing pool of water. The car swished past, and rage filled her heart as she recognised it. It was the blue van that had belonged to her mother, just like the house and all the furniture inside it. Eliza was driving, and beside her sat Dube and Khefasi.

She walked back into the street, wondering where they were driving to so fast and so late in the night, and in this bad weather. Looking for her? Maybe. Maybe rushing to the police station to see if she had gone there to report them for the assault. Just like the last time.

But the police were not the people she was going to seek assistance from. Never! Just last week, Eliza had badly beaten her with an electric cord for sleeping on the sofa in the living room while there were still

customers in the house. Immaculate had then fled to the police station, where she had found that man Khefasi in the charge office. A tearful Immaculate had made her report to him, and Khefasi had taken her from the charge office into another office, where he had beaten her on the buttocks with a rubber truncheon. He had then phoned Dube on his cell-phone to come and pick her up, after threatening her sternly that, if she did not behave at home, he would send her to a prison that had hardened criminals that did bad things to kids like her.

That had really scared Immaculate and she had started having dreams of really running away from home, for ever.

She heard barking a block away, and, when she glanced behind her, discovered the puppy had disappeared.

She emerged from the houses, and, ahead of her, in the rain, was Bump Nightclub. It was still open, and a few people milled around the entrance. A haulage truck, with a covered trailer, was parked in front of it.

Public emerged from the entrance of Bump Nightclub; he was dressed in a black raincoat and carried a quart of beer. It was raining, the raindrops sounding like rapid machine gun fire on the corrugated asbestos roofs of the surrounding township houses.

He waded through the water that filled the parking lot to his truck, got in, and sat behind the steering wheel. He opened the beer with his teeth, took a sip, then sat back, his eyes on the pavement in front of the nightclub, where three scantily dressed women stood, all looking hopefully in the direction of the truck.

Suddenly, he swore, flung the door of the truck open, and jumped out into the rain. He sprinted to the pavement, splashing water, straight to one of these women. Reaching her, he straightaway hit her on the mouth with his fist. She fell down, and he straddled her, his hands going for her throat.

Strong hands seized him under the armpits from behind and pulled him away from the woman. The woman leapt up and raced away around the corner of the building. Public struggled against the hands

holding him in a tight lock under his armpits and behind his neck; he wanted to give chase, but he could not disentangle himself.

“No Public, don’t do that!” a voice said, and he recognised it as belonging to Gaza, the club bouncer. Public ceased struggling, and the hands released him. Swearing, he walked to the corner of the building and looked around it into the rain. The woman had disappeared.

“What did she do?” Gaza asked. But Public did not reply. Muttering darkly, he ran back to his truck through the rain, opened the driver’s door and got inside.

He took his beer from the dashboard and drank from it, his eyes on the pavement again. The woman he had assaulted had not re-appeared, and he knew she was not going to, not as long as his truck was still parked there.

A month back, about to embark on a long cross border haul, he had found her at the nightclub, negotiated a price with her, and taken her to a lodge in the city. After drinking Mdala’s *muti*, when his nose was also throbbing, he had speared her. In the morning, when he had woken up, she had disappeared – as had all the money that had been in his wallet.

Tonight Public was embarking on another cross border haul to Namibia. He had already taken Mdala’s *muti*, and had come to this nightclub to pick up a woman of the road, just as he was a man of the road.

He drank his beer, his eyes still on the pavement, a curtain of light rain drizzling in front of his windscreen. Finally, a woman emerged from the door of the nightclub. He had seen her inside, and had liked her big boobs. She darted a look at the truck, and Public flicked his headlights and swished his wipers. She went back in, and emerged a short while later carrying an umbrella. Public had already started the truck engine.

A moment later, he was driving in the direction of the city centre, sharing his beer with her as she sat in the passenger seat. Unnoticed by him, a blue van was following his truck.

Three hours later, Public, now alone in the truck, was thirty kilometres from the city, headed for Namibia.

The rain had stopped as soon as he left the city, something that surprised Public, for he had expected that it would be raining out here in the sticks too. That was where the rain was needed the most, wasn't it, what with all these newly resettled farmers? Another truck, its right indicator winking merrily, drove past headed back towards the city, and Public grinned, looking at its taillights through his side mirror. Mdala's medicine was working well. No more palpitations for him. This was his truck, and nobody else in the company but him was going to drive it, the witching bastard.

The road was overhung by almost evenly spaced tall tress, and the truck, its headlights on bright, bored through this magical tunnel. He turned a bend, and, ahead, saw a van parked by the side of the road, a warning triangle on the road behind it. A woman stood beside the truck and she was flagging him down.

As he was driving at a modest speed, Public managed to bring the truck to a stop on the verge, just behind the van. He opened the driver's door and jumped down to the road.

He approached the woman. "What's the problem?" he asked as he got nearer.

"Fuel," the woman replied. "This government!"

The door of the van opened, and two men got out. They quickly walked towards Public, and he found himself looking down the muzzle of a pistol.

"This is a robbery," the man wielding the pistol said. He was big boned, and wore a khaki sunhat pulled low over his eyes. "Do as we say and no harm will come to you." Public had no intention to resist, for he considered his life far more valuable than the truck and its load, or anything else in this world – apart from one other thing...

The two men bundled him back into his truck, where he was ordered to drive and follow the van, while the two men sat beside him, the one in the middle with his gun digging into Public's ribs.

The van turned into a narrow side road, with Public behind it. Five

kilometres later, the van stopped. Public also stopped the truck.

“Tie him up,” the man with the gun commanded his gangling accomplice. The accomplice produced rope from his jacket pocket and tightly tied Public’s feet and hands together. The two men then got off the truck, after the one with the gun had removed the truck keys from the ignition and pocketed them.

The van was reversed to the back of the truck, and Public watched them in the light of the van through the side mirror offloading cigarette cartoons from his truck into their van.

The mission accomplished, the van drove away.

Public cursed, and strained against the ropes binding him, but they were too tight.

“Let me untie you,” a small voice said behind Public, and he nearly fainted with fright.

From the darkness of the cab, a little girl appeared from behind the seat, and hopped over it to the front.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” Public fired the questions, believing that finally today he was seeing a goblin, his heart thudding in his chest, threatening to explode out of it, shatter through the windscreen and flee away into the dark night.

“I hid in the truck when you were fighting outside Bump Nightclub and I fell asleep,” the girl said through chattering teeth as she shivered in her damp clothes. “I’m running away from home,” she continued in her small sad voice.

The fright left Public’s heart. “You nearly scared me, my daughter!” he exclaimed, faking a smile of bravado. “Listen, there is a knife in my right trouser pocket. Take it and please cut these ropes. We must escape in case those men come back. They might kill us. What is your name?”

“Immaculate.”

“Okay Immaculate, take the knife.”

Immaculate took the knife from Public’s pocket. It was an okapi. She pulled the blade open, and a moment later Public was freed from his bonds.

“Very good,” a grateful Public said as he opened a locker above the

windscreen in front of him. He took a key from inside.

“They took my ignition key, but I always keep a spare,” he said, starting the truck. “I am so forgetful, that is why.” He made a u-turn on the side road, flattening bushes in the process.

“I have to make a report to the police,” Public said to Immaculate once they were on the main road, and headed back to the city. He had turned on the heater and it was warm in the cab. “But what do I do about you, my little girl?”

“I am not going back home,” Immaculate replied with finality.

“You must go back;” insisted Public. “A child has to have a home to grow up in. Who do you live with?”

“I lived with my uncle and his wife.”

“Your parents?”

“My mother passed away two years ago, that’s when uncle came to live with me because I was going to be alone.”

“There is a flask of tea there in front of you,” Public said, pointing at the dashboard. “Take it and have a drink. You might catch a cold from those wet clothes.”

Immaculate did as she was told.

“I have a daughter like you,” Public went on as Immaculate drank steaming hot tea from a chipped metal cup. “But I don’t know where she is now, poor child. If only I could find her.”

“Did she run away?”

“No, she didn’t do that, instead, her mother ran away with her, and that was seven years ago. I have looked for them everywhere, and there is not even a sign of them. It’s as if they disappeared into the ground.”

“Why did her mother run away?” Immaculate was curious to know.

Public threw her a quick look. “She caught me with another woman.”

For the first time that day, Immaculate found herself smiling. This was a funny man.

And after she was gone, thought Public to himself, I couldn’t get it up properly, try as I might, until Mdala gave me his also nose raising *muti*. Sometimes Public thought that his runaway wife had bewitched

him as revenge.

“But she sent me a picture of herself and the child a few years later from wherever she was hiding,” Public went on. He flicked on the overhead light. “There it is,” he pointed at a picture pasted to the door of the locker above the windscreen. “I keep it there all the time for luck.”

A shocked Immaculate was looking at the picture. It was identical to the one at the head of her bed at home – a woman in a black miniskirt, white blouse, platform shoes and dark sunglasses carrying a baby girl with a background of a river cascading down a cliff.

“That’s my picture!” Immaculate was looking at Public, her eyes confused.

Public looked at Immaculate, his mouth wide open. Then his face broke into undisguised pleasure. “My God! My daughter Immaculate!”

She noticed that there was a swelling behind his ear – maybe those robbers had hit him before she woke up from where she was hiding behind his seat.

Dube was awakened from a deep slumber by a loud knocking on the door.

“Who is it at this time?” he muttered, flicking on the bedside light and looking at a clock on the dresser. It was three o’clock in the morning.

Beside him on the bed, Eliza stirred. “Maybe it’s Immaculate,” she muttered in a sleepy voice. “Go and see,” her voice strengthened. “And don’t let her in! I don’t want filth near me!”

When Dube opened the front door, dressed only in shorts, and carrying a belt in his right hand held behind his back, he was surprised to see the yard crawling with uniformed and armed policemen, some eight or nine of them. The one nearest to him addressed him.

“Are you Dube?”

“Yes officer,” Dube replied, and another policeman quickly stepped forward and Dube found himself in handcuffs.

Ten minutes later, Dube and Eliza were being bundled into the back

of a police van, both in handcuffs. Other policemen were loading cigarette cartoons they were carrying from Dube's house into another police van.

In the van was a handcuffed Khefasi.

"It's your kid," said Khefasi to Eliza and Dube as soon as he saw them. His face was puffed up, and his upper lip and nostrils smeared with blood. "She was in that cigarette truck, and she identified us to the police – damn! And she is calling that truck driver father. She must have gone crazy."

When The Fish Caught Him

He sat on the buttock shaped rock, now and then swatting at the mosquitoes plaguing his big ears and zig-zagging in front of his face as the dawn sky smiled, and the river glowed orange as the sun lifted its face from the horizon.

He felt a sharp tug on the rod, and an electric thrill charged through his body. He jerked the line out of the water. A big fish, flapping powerfully, landed on the short grass behind him.

He pinned the fish to the ground with his foot. Even then, it fought wildly. He picked up a stone and conked it hard on the head, killing it instantly.

Singing a lively song, he set off for home with his catch, where he was received like a king.

He liked this feeling of adulation more than the fish meat itself. So much so that, on the next unsuspecting dawn, he stole back to the river, clad in bright yellow overalls.

To his surprise, he found many other fishers lining the bank, receding as far as the eye could see in the grey light, and all dressed in silver overalls.

He confidently sat on the buttock-rock, as a king on his throne, and cast his line.

This time he hungered for a much bigger fish, for he had tasted fame.

His eyes never left the float. The sky swelled with light, and the river turned violet as the morning sun, bursting with promise, rose from slumber.

He felt a powerful jerk on the rod. He yanked the line, but it was unmoving, and the rod arced dangerously. He rammed the rod into the cleft in the buttock-rock, then quickly stripped naked.

“Don’t get into the water!” the other fishers all cried out. “It might be the lion-fish.”

With a hoarse roar, he leapt into the river, and swam underwater towards where his hook was held, his face contorted. Small silver fish

darted for safety before him.

Then, in front of him, there arose a mountain of a fish with a fierce looking lion's head. His hook was imbedded in its lower lip.

Snarling, it tore the hook out of its lip, seized him by the scruff of his neck, and hooked his lower lip with it. It grabbed the line, and, with a sharp flick of its tail, it turned around and sped away up the river, with him in tow behind.

It took him on a forced tour of all the rivers of the earth, where he saw the ghosts of all the fish that had been killed by man throughout the ages – some mere infants.

“Devil!” these fish screeched at him. “Murderer!”

They tried to bite him with their transparent teeth, but failed to do so. His lungs were bursting for air. He tried to remove the hook from his lip, and failed – then he blacked out.

When he came to, he was nibbling hungrily at a worm suspended in the water. It seemed to be looking at him with a puzzled recognition. Above him, out of the water, loomed the figure of a familiar looking man, in his hand he was holding a rod, poised over the water. His mouth opened in amazement. The big-eared man was clad in bright yellow overalls.

The worm wriggled into his open mouth, and, suddenly, he felt a sharp sting on his bottom lip – he tasted blood – a violent steely tug, and he was arcing through air, his tail flapping wildly...

The Bulldozers Are Coming

She stood before the open door, her eyes on the gateless gate beyond the main house. There was still no sign of him, or his pushcart – not that it had ever come on its own for that matter. And it was now approaching twilight, the afternoon shadows slowly merging into the pain in her stomach.

Next door, the old woman was pecking on the wall of her shack with a little hammer. Just like a woodpecker on a brick, the thought flitted through her mind. The old woman's lodger had fled in the morning, just as the reports that they were now coming this way had reached this side of the township.

She half wished she could help the old woman, but, God have mercy on her, she couldn't. She just did not have the strength. Not today. She wrung her hands, clasped them across her stomach, and let them fall to her side again. Then she sighed deeply, and limped back into the room. It was now dim inside – she moved back to the doorstep. The paraffin for the lamp and stove had run out last night, and there had been none at the shops. No candles either, just like bread and *mealie meal*.

Where are you my husband? Her heart called out to the greying sky. Could he have passed by the beer-garden as he usually did after work? Maybe – but no, not today! This wasn't a day for beer, especially with a wife in her condition alone at home.

Next door, the old woman still pecked on her wall. She half wondered if, at her pace, she was going to make it – save her window, her door and her asbestos roofing, because, it was said, when the bulldozer came, it simply smashed through without any questions asked.

If I pull the bed outside, the thought came to her, we will be able to sleep on it tonight behind the main house. If it then came when they were fast asleep, it would not run over them, as it could if they stayed in the room.

How she wished they were like the families of the ones who had

given the order for the demolitions – sitting in their big luxurious houses, eating warm suppers, and watching television, no fear in their hearts. And laughing as the news showed the poor furniture that the operation was flushing out.

Please come home. She wanted to scream. I am so scared.

And when it passed through here, where would they go to? That thought drenched her with fear. There was nowhere to go.

Suddenly she gasped sharply and clutched her stomach. She found herself kneeling on the ground, tears streaming down her cheeks, with the old woman's hand on her shoulder. The afternoon came back to her as another spasm hit.

The racing police trucks had appeared at the market, seemingly from nowhere. A policeman had chased her and had tripped her with his boot. She had fallen to the ground, and he had pinned her down, his knee grinding painfully into her stomach, where her baby grew. But she had been one of the lucky ones who had managed to escape. As the policeman had raised his baton to strike her, a brick had struck him on the mouth below the raised visor of his helmet, and he had fallen to the ground beside her. She had leapt up and fled, now limping, and had not stopped until she was in her backyard lodging room and the door closed and locked.

Cold sweat sprang to her brow as she felt something liquid snake down her inner thigh.

A Heart in My Hole

I never want to see my mother again. I shudder at the thought that some of my siblings' fathers could be handsome 'boys' from the neighbourhood. But no, Mandla could not be my father – we are the same age, even if his English is kilometres better than mine.

“It is time you got married, *mzukulu*,” Uncle is saying in his grating voice.

I hate it so much, when, of all the things in the village to talk about, he chooses just that.

“It is not yet time, Uncle.” I try to hedge, as I always do. And the old man never seems to understand, which can be so irritating at times. I would never dare tell him that; he is my favourite uncle you see, my mother's brother, but, nevertheless, as far as I am concerned, it's none of his business if I die a bachelor or not.

We are sitting in the shade of the big *xakuxaku* tree behind the kitchen. When he has no patients, this is where Uncle is usually found. From this tree, we can see the front gate, and the dirt track that coils like a dusty worm from the surrounding mopane forest, the track that can lead to anywhere, to the store, to the grinding mill, to the missionary school, to the growth point, and to the city. The track that brought me here one blustery winter afternoon three years ago, fleeing the city.

Next to Uncle's stool, also enjoying the cool shade, and in domestic harmony, a chick sits on the cat's back. The cat is dozing between the legs of Bamba, Uncle's biggest and fiercest dog, that keeps nibbling lazily at an irritation on his left haunch. The hen and the rest of the noisy brood are nowhere in sight.

“If you leave it too late, somebody will steal her away from you.” Uncle is insistent. He is carefully clipping at his fingernails with nail clippers. It is a humid day, the air crackling with vengeful heat.

Nozipho is a girl in the village who I am seeing, and Uncle knows her. Her father owns the grinding mill, which she operates. Most times

I go to see her there, I find her covered from head to toe in the white dust of *mealie meal*, with only her beautiful eyes and teeth showing, the diesel driven grinding machine thundering behind her, and us conversing sweet nothings in loud voices. But behind that comical maize meal dust, I have seen a heart and a body that can make a man pace his life anew.

“We must write to your mother in the city, she can assist you with the *lobola*. After all, you are her first-born child, and she is well employed, and she also knows you cannot afford it. I can also throw in something. What are kin for?”

One could mistake Uncle for a modern medical doctor. Everyday, when he wakes up early in the morning, the first thing he does is to wash and dress smartly in suit and tie, before he sees any of his patients. His hair is pure white, and he has a short and stocky body that he carries well, despite his advanced age. As his assistant, he always insists that I wear a white dust coat, which makes me feel rather silly, for, after all, he is a bone thrower.

“Do not talk about Mother,” I reply, a dark shadow settling over my heart.

Before I even knew how to decide for myself, my mother, a lone parent, overburdened my infant shoulders with a ridiculous English name. Whoever heard of anybody in this world called Too Big? When I asked her in later years how come the name, she shouted – “stupid, can’t you see your head is too big? It gave me too much trouble at childbirth; the doctor had to slice open my stomach for you to hop out that way, it nearly made me lose my life!” She had given me that name to remind her of that day, for a close shave with death isn’t a matter to be easily forgotten.

When at school, I discovered that she was obsessed with my learning the English language above everything else. As a schoolteacher by profession, she gave me extra English lessons at home almost every night, weekends included. She even bought expensive English story books and forced me to read all of them –

Robin Hood, Little Red Riding Hood, Jack and the Bean Stalk – often twisting my ears as an incentive for me to open my eyes and mind to them. She even cooked expensive English food and crammed it down my throat in her attempt to fertilise the language she had planted in me, hoping it would grow rich on my young tongue.

I tried as much as I could to master the Queen's language, to twist it over mine, but alas, being endowed with a rock hard tongue, I failed dismally; the language could not crack the rock. It was like trying to catch a fish in water with bare hands. And with this failure, I failed all the subjects I wrote for 'O'Level that were set in English. Of course, I passed isiNdebele, my mother tongue, with a clear distinction. And how all those who heard of this laughed at me! – my school mates, my neighbours in the township, the pretty girls – I won't mention my mother, she was apoplectic, and nearly had a heart attack.

"Stupid!" she had raged. "How did Mandla pass English when his parents are not teachers like me? He did not have access to the kind of books I bought you." Mandla, who I had been in the same class with, was a handsome boy who lived next door. He had passed all his subjects with distinctions, and an 'A' level place was waiting for him. I had not replied. What could I say?

From that day onwards, she developed high blood pressure, and I noticed she never again looked me straight in the eyes as she used to.

"But what about the miller's girl?" Uncle is insistent. "As your uncle, I am concerned, *mzukulu*"

"It is difficult, Uncle," I rejoin. "It is not going to work."

"Do I sense something in your voice?" It is said quickly, subtly.

A woodpecker knocks sharply on the trunk of the tree above us, as if a door somewhere should creak open in response, and this life would step inside, leaving behind all unanswered questions, the wars, the hate, the diseases, all suspended in space, rendered irrelevant.

My eyes are on the blue-grey dome of the meaningless sky.

"I have dreams, Uncle."

A dove coos in the distance, and a dry leaf twirls down from the tree

and lands beside my bare foot. I pick it up and crush it into a fine powder, as Uncle snips at the nail of his left little finger.

My disgraced mother decided to give up on me – she had provided me with a fair chance at school, and at home, and I had been too lazy, and too stupid, to pass anything but isiNdebele. Her dreams of me getting a respectable job from *amakhiwa* in the city had evaporated. Now I had to make my own way through the concrete maze called life, since she had six other children to pay school fees for. I was now a burden on her that she could well afford to do without. She unceremoniously took away her ball of wool that was supposed to guide me through life, and, at seventeen, I found myself pounding the streets, eking a pitiful existence out of nothing.

“What are these dreams that make a young man like you forsake marriage? Isn’t that what life is all about in the first place, to have a family and a home that you can call your own?” Uncle asks, swatting at a fly that is threatening to settle on his nose.

“I really don’t know what it is that I want right now, but it is not a family of my own.” I let the powder of the crushed leaf sift from my hand to the ground, and wipe my hand on the knee of my faded jeans. “It is something out there that I am failing to put my finger on.” The fly buzzes around my mouth, and I also swat at it, miss it, and it zips away.

“Sometimes you say really strange things,” Uncle says, pocketing the nail clippers. He picks at a loose thread on his jacket and throws it into the still air. “Out where? There are only two lives, the spiritual, and the physical, and you only marry in the physical. So if you don’t marry in this life, there is no other chance.”

“Is marrying that important?” The cat is licking its paws, its eyes half hooded, as if drunk from the heat. It is black all over, apart from a white patch on its forehead. I don’t like cats; maybe it’s because of the fact that where I was raised in the township, they are treated as goblins, something good for stoning only. Sometimes I get this strange feeling that maybe this cat is Uncle’s goblin, since he dabbles in the occult. He

is so fond of it that he lets it sleep in his bedroom, something which is surely un-African.

“What a stupid question!” he retorts. “As you know, I have three wives, all because the experience is so wonderful that I had to repeat it. I could do it again, but my poor back does not allow that now.” He wiggles his back slightly as he says this.

Once, the old man woke me up in the middle of the night in my hut – to ask for condoms. Uncle said he had a new woman in the village he was visiting that night, but he was ‘scared’ of her. I gave him three and he asked for four. He whispered to me that the woman was one of his patients whose husband worked in the city. She had come that morning to ask him to exorcise her of an enormous libido that was threatening her marriage, and he was just going to do that, put out fire with fire.

A few minutes later, I was outside my hut, relieving myself against the wall in the shadows of the moonlit darkness. I saw a movement in the direction of the guest hut, and watched Uncle entering through the door. The hut was unlit inside. A white woman from Germany, named Gerda, who had come to consult Uncle, was staying there for the night. Although older than me, she had nice green eyes and a well-rounded figure. Curious, I had stood in the shadows, my eyes on the door, Bamba at my feet, and – aha! – Uncle came out three hours later, dressed only in white boxer shorts, his clothes and shoes in his hands, his teeth shining white in a smile in the moonlight.

In the morning, Uncle asked me, with a sly smile, to escort Gerda to the bus stop, as she was leaving. On the way, she told me in broken English that Uncle was a great man. She had blonde hair that fell to her shoulders, which she constantly kept brushing back, a movement that I liked so much. Her face was milky white, and her lips set in a permanent smile that tickled me under the armpits. Replying, also in broken English, I told her that she should know better. She looked at me, her brow slightly furrowed, and I felt her green eyes flick over my exposed and well-muscled biceps, over my posterior, and down my sturdy legs. I had on a vest, an old pair of shorts, and plastic sandals on

my feet. Then she asked me if there was a river nearby. I responded that there were only little pools left now because of the drought. Let's go see pools, she enthused. I led her there, shouldering her heavy backpack.

When we got to the river, she walked to one of the pools ahead of me, and disappeared around a rock. When I rounded the rock, I found her in the pool, which sparkled a newly minted silver from the sun, up to her neck, all her clothes on the sand beside the rock, her pink panties on top of the pile. The water was transparent. Three cows, thin to the bone, stood on the far bank under the shade of a thorn tree, gazing our way. Behind the cows, the Matopo Hills slumbered, their jagged tops threatening to caesar the belly of the sky open. The river valley was deathly quiet, not even the flutter of a leaf, or the blow of a breeze.

I turned away in embarrassment, and she called out that I should give her a towel, which was in the bag that I was carrying. I removed the towel, leaned towards her, and laughing, she pulled me into the water, as one of the cows suddenly mooed sorrowfully.

A few weeks later, Uncle received brand new solar panels from Gerda, and I a suitcase of clothing. She also sent a card in broken English promising that she was going to come and consult Uncle again in six months time when she returned from Germany, for she was still not satisfied about something in her life.

"My mother is unmarried, and she has six children with six different fathers, and most of the fathers are unknown," I say, as defence.

"It is the city and her teaching job that did that to her," Uncle says. "Look at her, she says she is educated, but no man can marry her now." He takes out a white handkerchief from his trouser pocket, flicks it across the tip of his pointed and highly polished brown shoes, and returns it to his pocket. "But that doesn't mean that you have to be like her."

I do not know who my father is, and once, as a kid, Mandla had successfully goaded me into asking Mother who my father was, and, much to his amusement, I had been answered with a severe beating

with a peach tree stick.

“Stupid!” Mother had screamed at me after the beating, wagging the now shredded tip of the stick at my tear streaked face. “This is your father!”

I walked the factories, I walked the shops, but all in vain. It seemed as if that year jobs for school failures were out of season. I walked the homes of the affluent, seeking employment in their gardens, but every job was taken. Nobody wanted to hear about me. And there wasn’t a father to turn to, to ask for direction.

And what rage I felt. It could have blasted that language out of existence! It had spoiled my life!

“A man is not a man until he has a wife,” insists Uncle. He lifts a calabash of *maseke*, drinks from it and passes it to me.

I take a sip and place the calabash at my feet. “A man does not marry to please other people either,” I reply.

“No! It is not pleasing other people, *mzukulu*. It is your sacred duty to your ancestors. You have to perpetuate mankind, otherwise the world will run out of people.”

Uncle has a very big homestead with nine huts all neatly built and plastered with red mud, with zigzag patterns belting the middle of the walls. Each of his three wives has a hut of her own. I also have one, which Uncle had built for me when I came here. Of his ten daughters, eight are married away, with two from his youngest wife still remaining in the kraal, one three years old and the other doing Grade Seven at Primary School. As today is Saturday morning, they are all away in the fields, preparing for the rains that are still refusing to even come into sight on the horizon and settle the villagers’ hearts. Hunger is amongst them, living with them, sleeping with them, playing with them, grieving with them. Those who do not have relatives in the city, or do not have party cards to access drought relief, are playing ‘scientist’, experimenting with various tree leaves and grass in the forest, trying to discover which ones can give them much needed vitamins, and which

ones will not kill their beloved children even if they do not have any vitamins, because leaves and water are better than air and water.

Uncle does not have a male child, and I sort of fill that gap, I think. He does not lack for anything, His cattle kraal is well stocked, he has many goats, he has a lot of money, and if he is short of anything, he just sends me to the Growth Point to purchase it, no matter how expensive it is in these days of food shortages. And some of his clients, who come from all corners of the globe, bring him scarce commodities – *mealie meal*, sugar, salt, cooking oil and whisky.

Despite his traditional background, Uncle appreciates the use of condoms. I do too. I must take after him, since he is my mother's brother.

"The world is crowded enough without my adding any offspring to it," I say.

He clears his throat. "What kind of talk is that?" The grate in his voice does not go away. It has been like this for sometime now. Something must be wrong with his voice box, for, I remember, a few years back his voice was very clear. "Where is your sense of duty to your ancestors? You have to have children to look after you in your old age, when you are unable to work for yourself. It's only that I was unlucky not to have sons, but my wives and property are going to look after me. My married daughters brought me enough cattle as their *lobola* for me not to worry about anything anymore."

"I thought the duty of parents is to let their children be free to live their own lives, not enslave them to their feebleness."

He sniffs. "No wonder where you come from children put their parents in old people's homes. What is that?"

"A person has to prepare for the future so as not to be a burden in old age," I reply stubbornly. "I will not marry a wife so she can come and be slave to my parents."

"No, *mzukululu!*" he claps his hands in exasperation. "I don't know what is in your head for you to talk like that. I am only trying to show you the light to life." He leans towards me. "And it's through a woman.

Without that sacred window, life ceases to exist.” He points a finger at me, its nail neatly cut. “I have seen your problem.” There is the growl of a car engine in the distance, getting louder.

“I am not one of your patients.”

“You lack purpose in life,”

I do not reply, but lift the calabash, take a sip from it and hand it to him. He takes a sip and places the calabash at his feet.

“Without purpose, your life lacks meaning,” he goes on.

“How much are you going to charge me?” I ask, my voice angry.

“The truth hurts,” he replies. “And that also means there is a heart in that hole.”

I look at him, stupefied.

The chick hops down from the cat’s back and struts away towards the cluck of the hen, which can now be heard behind the kitchen. The cat stretches, stands up and walks away in another direction. Bamba growls and streaks towards the gate, barking loudly.

“Bamba!” Uncle shouts at the dog, and it brakes to a sudden halt. I stand up, looking towards the gate. A *Pajero* has emerged from the mopane trees, headed for the gate down the dirt track. I recognise it. It is the Minister. He comes here regularly. All decisions of his ministry are made at the throw of Uncle’s bones.

I unhook my dust-coat from a nail on the trunk of the *xakuxaku* tree as Uncle stands up, straightening his tie.

One morning I was lucky. I got a temporary job offloading a container at a canning factory for one hour, and I was paid one hundred dollars. As it was Friday, I decided to call it a day and go back home early. I arrived there at ten o’clock, a time I knew all my brothers and sisters would be at school. Mother was in the afternoon session at her school that week, her lessons commencing at 12.30 p.m. I wanted to give her half of the money I had earned, as it was my first salary.

When I got home, I let myself into the house through the back door. The house was silent. I walked into the sitting room through the kitchen.

They were on the carpet, locked together, naked.

Mother saw me from underneath the man, her face streaked with sweat. She twisted her body, throwing him off her. It was Mandla. He was not wearing a condom. I turned around and fled into the bedroom I shared with my three brothers, closed and locked the door. A door banged closed in the direction of Mother's bedroom. A child was screaming shrilly outside.

I quickly packed all my clothes into a plastic carrier bag, jumped out of the bedroom window and headed for Renkini Long Distance Bus Terminus.

Three hours later, Uncle welcomed me at his homestead, and had a fat chicken killed for me, which we had for supper. He did not ask me any questions, but kept saying, "Welcome, *mzukululu*," in a reassuring voice. He has still not asked me any questions about my coming to him. Sometimes I wonder if he threw his bones in privacy, and divined the hole in my heart.

Glossary

<i>amacimbi</i>	worms that feed on mopane trees
<i>amaJelimana</i>	German people
<i>amakhiwa</i>	white people
<i>basop</i>	colloquial Ndebele derived from Afrikaans meaning beware
<i>bhu</i>	sound of fall of a heavy object
<i>chimbado</i>	loan sharking
<i>eeish!</i>	exclamation
<i>ftsek</i>	insult derived from the Afrikaans voetsek (go away)
<i>hayikhona</i>	no
<i>isalukazi</i>	an old woman.
<i>kapenta</i>	small dried fish
<i>lobola</i>	bride price
<i>mase</i>	traditional beer
<i>mbanje</i>	marijuana
<i>mealie meal</i>	maize meal
<i>mthakathi</i>	witch
<i>muti</i>	medicine
<i>mzukulu</i>	nephew
<i>nja</i>	dog
<i>sadza</i>	maize meal porridge
<i>salibonani</i>	greeting (I see you)
<i>scud</i>	a local traditional brew, cheaper than clear beer.
<i>shamwari</i>	Shona for girlfriend incorporated into Ndebele colloquial
<i>sisi</i>	sister
<i>tshomi</i>	colloquial Ndebele for friend
<i>umvusankuzi</i>	aphrodisiac
<i>vusankunzi</i>	traditional viagra
<i>wena</i>	you
<i>xakuxaku</i>	snot apple tree



Dancing with Life is a collection of short stories by Christopher Mlalazi. He has had stories published in anthologies inside and outside Zimbabwe, but this is his first collection.

Christopher Mlalazi may well be the most promising younger writer in Zimbabwe today. His fiction captures the edgy energy of townships where young people have learned to be light on their feet, their dancing born of economic necessity and mocking disrespect for traditional authority. Mlalazi depicts contemporary life in Zimbabwe with an uncompromising determination to explore grievous social wounds and with a creative panache that will win him readers within and beyond his home country.'

*Patricia Alden, Professor of African Literature,
St Lawrence University*

'Christopher Mlalazi is the rising voice of the ghetto, with all its violence, sharp anger, bitter protestations and tangible promise of a better tomorrow.'

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